BAPPADITYA PAUL

The First Naxal

An Authorised Biography of KANU SANYAL

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An Authorised Biography of Kanu Sanyal

Bappaditya Paul

SAGE

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To

Kanu Sanyal himself

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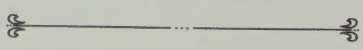

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Preface

In May 2014, the Naxalite Movement or Naxalism completed 47 years as a distinct political ideology in India. What had sparked off some five decades ago in the spring of 1967 as a peasant uprising in the rural hamlet of Naxalbari in northern West Bengal has refused to die down even on the face of a persistent state suppression and a general rejection by the mainstream political class in India.

Past the initial few years, Naxalite Movement has been riddled by factionalism and the lack of a coherent organisational shape; yet, it is quite remarkable that the Movement continues to survive all oddities. In fact, all credit goes to the Indian administration—civil and police alike, and the opportunistic standing of the country's ruling class, that over the years, Naxalism has become a synonym for dissent.

This notwithstanding, there is lack of clarity in public mind as to what the Naxalite Movement stands for and what it strives to achieve. The reluctant urban middle class of India considers it a menace plaguing the country's hinterland and the self-indulgent bureaucrats perceive it to be a foreign ploy to derail India's growth story.

But leave aside the issue of perceptions and whether one supports or abhors Naxalism, should it not make one wonder what is there in the Naxalite ideology that keeps the Movement alive and relevant after so many years? What is there in the ideology that despite there being no centre to hold it together, the Movement continues to reverberate in the peripheries across India?

These were the simple quests that took this author to Naxalbari and to Kanu Sanyal, the founder of the Naxalite Movement, in 2007, with a very vague and to some extent wrong notions about Naxalism.

One of the misconceptions (which is widespread) was the understanding that it was Charu Mazumdar who had waged the Naxalite

Movement and Kanu Sanyal was his follower lieutenant. The other prominent misconception being that Naxalism and the Maoist Movement were the same and one; this also made the author wonder why the Indian police were not arresting Sanyal and his comrades while they roamed in the open although the cops were always after the Maoists.

Initially, Kanu Sanyal was opposed to the idea of having a biography, and as a matter of fact, he had in the past thwarted the initiatives of a few other journalists who sought to pen his biography.

But this time, Sanyal relented when pointed out that his story was also the story of the Naxalite Movement and after him there would be none to throw a light on its origin, evolution, disintegration and the subsequent revival.

The reasoning clicked with him as several misconceptions about Naxalism had made into the public perception and Sanyal had once himself attempted to clear the air by jotting down the actual story but could not proceed beyond a few pages.

Beginning 2007, over the next three years, this author sat across Kanu Sanyal at regular intervals and listened to him as he dusted the leaves of his voluminous life. There were several such sittings but 121 of them were in the form of recorded interviews. These interviews were conducted at Sanyal's party commune at Hatighisha in Naxalbari and at the residences of his comrades and acquaintances spread across Siliguri subdivision.

This book is primarily based on Sanyal's own accounts of his life and the Naxalite Movement, albeit a number of secondary researches have also gone into it. Throughout the book, Sanyal's recollections and observations have been used in direct quotes but without clarifying where he had stated them: this has been done to make the narration sound more authentic and intimate but at the same time not cumbersome.

One significant aspect of this biography is that the protagonist had personally read and cleared all its chapters but the last one that deals with his aberrant demise. And this makes this book the only authorised biography of Kanu Sanyal in any language.

Incidentally, on the afternoon of 23 March 2010 when the news of Sanyal's demise rang in, this author was drafting the last chapter of the biography. But after that, obviously, the chapter had to be undone

and written afresh. If the author is allowed some artistic liberty here, he will put it like this that Kanu Sanyal made him conclude the biography the way he wanted.

To quote Saleem Sinai from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*: 'This is not what I had planned; but perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin.'

Acknowledgements

Self-made man or woman is a term often used to describe entrepreneurial success; yet, it is not merely a theory but a quantifiable fact that none in this world is self-made as such.

All through our life, every individual receives nourishment from nature, family, friends, neighbours and the society at large, and our achievements or failures are as much a contribution of all of them as are ours. Taking this belief into account, there are several individuals who have helped in making this book happen.

To begin with, I am grateful to Mr Diwas Gahatraj, a friend and former colleague at *The Statesman*, Siliguri, who had indirectly germinated in me the idea of writing this book by suggesting in 2007 that I should interview Kanu Sanyal on the Singur Land Movement that was creating a ruffle in the politics of West Bengal back then.

Next, I am indebted to my mentor teacher Dr Biplab Loho Choudhury of Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, for seeking to know the purpose of this book when I first shared the plan with him in mid-2007. This made me take an objective look at my plan and to the satisfaction of both of us, realise that this book was actually a necessity to understand the Naxalite Movement—one that has kept the Indian democracy engrossed for over 47 years now.

I am grateful to late Kanu Sanyal's younger brother Mr Prabir Sanyal of Siliguri, the West Bengal state secretary of the CPI-ML Mr Subrata Basu of Barrackpore, North 24 Parganas, and late Sanyal's closest aide Mr Pradeep Debnath, for helping me with several valuable documents, literatures and photographs pertaining to the Naxalite Movement. I have provided with the newspaper clippings and scanned documents that have been included towards the end of the book. Without those materials, it would have been very difficult to relive

and authenticate several life events of Kanu Sanyal and the Naxalbari uprising.

My gratitude goes to late Kanu Sanyal's nephew Mr Arindam Sanyal of Siliguri, party comrades Mrs Uma Lahiri of Bagdogra and Mr Jagadish Roy of Gosainpur who had gracefully allowed me at their residences for conducting several of the 121-odd interviews of late Sanyal that form the foundation of this book.

I am thankful to Mr A.K. Chaturvedi, headmaster of Pushparani Roy Memorial High School, Kurseong, for helping me with a brief history of the school where Kanu Sanyal had studied; to Mr Prem Arora, Press photographer based in Siliguri for contributing two photographs of Sanyal's funeral; to senior journalist Mr Debasis Sarkar of Siliguri for lending me a book that deals in the history of the Communist Movement of Darjeeling district; and to Mr Ravindra Kumar, editor, *The Statesman*, for allowing me to reproduce a few articles in this book.

I am also indebted to my aunt Mrs Maya Sarkar of Tilak Road, Siliguri, whose house was my nest for three long years. She is one of the very few people to know from the very beginning that I was working on this book and has anxiously waited with her prayers for it to become a reality.

Although the support of family members is only obvious, I cannot restrain but record my gratitude for younger brother Pronob, who in a bid to fast track the drafting of this book used to make me commit a target of words that I was to pen every week and meticulously followed up the progress months after months at the risk of annoying me. My elder brother Biplob and my mother Mrs Jyotshna Rani Paul have been a constant source of inspiration. It would be no exaggeration to say that my family and relatives waited for this book more than I did.

I am also grateful to SAGE Publications for posing faith and deciding to publish a novice writer like me; and last but not least, to you, the reader, who has considered this book worth to leaf through.

CHAPTER ONE

23 March 2010, 3 p.m.

Sebdella Jote, a serene hamlet located 20 km north of Siliguri town in northern West Bengal, is bustling with sudden unusual activity.

Scores of media persons, a sizeable contingent of police and a few hundred aboriginal *Adivasi* rural people have gathered around a humble mud dwelling whose door is closed from inside.

In desperation to record glimpses of the goings-on indoors, some video camera-wielding newsmen place their lens on the hovel's portholes.

Inside the hutment, in one corner lay standstill an ancient cupboard stacked with books, newspapers and files. In another corner, slinging from a string are some used apparels. An unused cot covered with cobweb stands beside.

There is no other furniture in the one-room hovel, whose mud-plastered walls are displayed with framed photographs of Lenin, Stalin, Engles, Mao Tse-tung and a few other Communist leaders.

At the centre of the hutment, surrounded by five mute individuals, is an old man hanging from the ceiling by his neck. Clothed in a lungi and a half-sleeve vest, his feet are in partial contact with the mud floor, head tilted on the left of his lifeless body.

In front of him seated idle is a plastic chair; a wooden stool is close by. A little away, on the mud floor, lay a tattered mattress and two pillows.

Of the five mute individuals, Hemant Sewa is a magistrate, conducting an inquest of the dead body and jotting down necessary details on a diary.

Another man, Pradeep Debnath, is drafting the first information report (FIR). He has been an aide of the deceased.

Standing next to Debnath is Arindam Sanyal, the deceased's nephew; a little away is friend Dulal Karanjai. The fifth person is a journalist, observing the proceedings silently.

Done with his job, the magistrate asks the others present to cut the nylon rope and bring down the body. The instruction is followed instantly without the expanse of a word and the body of the octogenarian is now rested on the tattered mattress below.

At this point, the lone door of the hutment opens up for once and the additional superintendent of the police in Siliguri, Gaurav Sharma, gets in. Gaurav enquires about the inquest and then asks for the body to be taken out to the ambulance parked outside. The body is to be sent for post-mortem.

The moment the dead body is taken out of the room on a stretcher, a collective wail ruptures through the dry spring sky; 'Oh Kanu *Da* …', screamed the *Adivasi* men and women, making the air too heavy to breathe!

The *Adivasi*s are grieving the demise of their messiah—Kanu Sanyal, the founder of the Naxalite Movement. The messiah is now leaving Sebdella Jote village, forever. He is leaving the hamlet that had been his address for the past 30 years.

~

Kanu Sanyal was not born at Sebdella Jote. He was born at Kurseong in Darjeeling hills in 1929.

His father, Annada Govinda Sanyal, was a court clerk and mother, Nirmala Devi, a homemaker. Nirmala was Annada Govinda's third wife; the first two wives had died of illness leaving behind one son each. Kanu Sanyal was his third son born to Nirmala.

The Sanyal family originally belonged to Salgaria in Pabna district in pre-Independent India. The place is now part of sovereign Bangladesh.

Annada Govinda was an infant when his parents moved to Darjeeling into the house of their maternal grandfather Pyari Mohan Talukdar. Talukdar was a government employee with the British Raj. Placed in a supervisory position in the Deputy Commissioner's office at Darjeeling, he used to command enormous influence in the affairs of the hill town.

With an influential grandpa taking charge of their family, Annada Govinda faced no hurdles in completing matriculation and eventually getting recruited at the Darjeeling Sessions' Court as a clerk.

By the time Annada Govinda married for the third time due to the untimely demise of his first two wives, he had got transferred to the subdivisional court at Kurseong.

Annada Govinda's was a joint family and his younger siblings used to stay put with him. On relocating to Kurseong, the family put up in a rented house at the town's Bhalu Busty locality.

In the monsoon of 1929, at this Bhalu Busty rented house in Kurseong, Annada Govinda's third wife Nirmala gave birth to her first child, a baby boy.[1] This son of Nirmala and Annada Govinda would later become famous as Kanu Sanyal, the founder of the landmark Naxalbari Movement.

~

[1] There is no authentic document available that records Sanyal's actual date of birth. But his matriculation certificate issued by the Calcutta University puts his age at 16 years 8 months as on 1 March 1947. Going by this, Sanyal's date of birth should have been in mid-1930, but he himself had rejected this as incorrect.

'I remember, while filling up the registration form for matriculation exam, my parents reduced my age by about a year. Moreover, I passed matriculation in 1947 in the second attempt. Hence, so far as I can calculate, I was born in the monsoon of 1929,' Sanyal had told in an interview at Sebdella Jote in 2007.

Kanu Sanyal's actual name was Krishna Kumar Sanyal. The name was conferred on him by his paternal uncle Girija Govinda, but it sunk into oblivion with the passage of time.

'At home, *Maa* (mother) used to call me by the nickname *Kanu*. But for whatever reason, this nickname later replaced my actual name. People started identifying me as Kanu Sanyal,' he would tell.

Sanyal was growing up in the joint family, which had 'quite a large number of members', including his two elder stepbrothers. Four more siblings were born to his mother Nirmala—two brothers and two sisters. Thus, in addition to Sanyal's six siblings, his uncles' wives and their children also used to lodge with them. Eventually, accommodating such a large family in the small rented house became difficult.

Hence, the entire family moved into a new rented premise owned by Sudhar Chandra Sarkar. The new house too was located at the same Bhalu Busty area. Sanyal family had rented the entire ground floor of the bi-storied building, on the first floor of which lived the landlord family.

In the new house, they got three large bedrooms, one small bedroom and a kitchen. Despite this, due to the large number of occupants, the house would appear to Sanyal 'like a hotel with so many boarders'.

This feeling of 'living in a hotel' used to be more palpable during lunch or dinner, when all the Sanyal siblings would sit together making a circle and Nirmala served them meal.

'Managing the affairs of such a large family was tough. But *Maa* used to dispense the task like an expert manager. The huge responsibility had churned out a tough person of her,' Sanyal would point out.

~

Kanu Sanyal was a reckless entity ever since childhood. He had some dominating traits as well and used to command his group of playmates. On rare occasions, if anyone dared defy his authority, he would rough up him/her mercilessly.

For Sanyal, getting into mischief was a routine affair. During the winter, in order to beat the chilling cold at Kurseong, he will bring

down the wooden boundary fencing of neighbourhood households and organise bonfire with friends.

As is obvious, the affected neighbours will lodge a complaint with his mother—whom Sanyal and all his siblings were 'scared of like anything'.

Consequent to such misadventures, receiving corporal punishment from mother Nirmala was a routine evening affair for Sanyal. Yet, he will not cease but indulge in mischief again.

CHAPTER TWO

When Sanyal turned five, mother Nirmala decided getting him into formal education by observing the traditional practice of *hatekhori*.

Hatekhori is a Hindu ritual, during which a child is made to write the first letter of his or her life under the supervision of a *Brahmin* priest. The ceremony is held on the day of *Basanta Panchami* and is marked by the *Brahmin*'s invocation of the Hindu Goddess *Devi Saraswati*. This ritual is particularly common among the Bengalis.

To administer *hatekhori*, Nirmala took Sanyal to Siliguri—a small business hub located in the plains of Darjeeling district. Similar to now, Siliguri in those days too was mostly populated by the Bengalis.

It was winter, and the mother–son duo put up in the house of Nirmala's uncle, Hara Kumar Bagchi, at the Kalahati area.

At Babupara in Siliguri, adjacent to the now Jyotshnamoyee Higher Secondary School, there was a primary school. The school used to function from a tiny hutment and a Hindu *Brahmin*, Janaki *Babu*, was its only teacher.

On the recommendation of Nirmala's uncle Hara Kumar Bagchi, Janaki *Babu* administered Sanyal's *hatekhori* at his primary school.

Completing the *hatekhori* ritual, Sanyal and his mother returned to Kurseong. Soon after this, Sanyal embarked on the first standard studies at home.

A year later, father Annada Govinda got him admitted at the neighbourhood Kurseong Primary School, directly into the second standard. The medium of study at this school was English, but they also used to teach a Bengali language paper as compulsory studies into the mother tongue.

'Not so serious in studies'—Sanyal would simultaneously carry on with schooling and mischief and would sail through.

After the fourth standard, going against Sanyal's will, father Annada Govinda got him admitted at the Victoria English School at Kurseong. Run by Christian missionaries, Victoria was entirely an English medium institute and unlike Sanyal's primary school, did not offer studies in Bengali.

'I categorically told my father that I do not want to study in Victoria, but he paid no heed to my objections. However, within a few months, I compelled him to pull me out of Victoria,' Sanyal had explained.

He was then admitted at the Kurseong Coaching School in the fifth standard. It was a private school run by two Bengali gentlemen named Jadunath Kushari and Atul Bihari Roy.

In addition to Kushari and Roy, the school had a few more Bengali educators and although here too the medium of study was English, the institute used to teach Bengali literature as a special language paper.

In 1942, Kurseong Coaching School merged with the neighbourhood Kurseong ME School. Consequent upon this, the school was renamed Pushparani Roy Memorial HE School.

Manoranjan Roy, a highly placed official at the Calcutta High Court, had donated ₹5,000 in the memory of his departed sister Pushparani Roy and that's how the school was re-christened after her.

Subsequently, Calcutta University accorded it the status of a high school in 1943.

~

Pushparani Roy Memorial School was a co-educational institute with the majority of the students hailing from Bengali families residing in and around Kurseong.

Sanyal's uncle Girija Govinda was a maths teacher at the school.

For Sanyal, getting into mischief, roughing up classmates and receiving punishment in return continued unabated in this new school as well. He will not oppose punishment for the mischief he actually did, but 'would never ever accept a false charge, whatever be the consequence'.

In his first year at the Pushparani School, one day the headmaster accused him of smoking *bidi*. But in reality, Sanyal did not smoke.

He vehemently opposed the allegation right on the face of the headmaster. Furthermore, going a step ahead, he demanded that the headmaster should come up with some proof or present a witness in support of the allegation.

The consequence, as obvious, was not very sweet! The headmaster thrashed him severely for the 'defiance'. Back at home, his math-teacher uncle, Girija Govinda, supplemented the 'treatment' further. Sanyal had no other option but to withstand the 'torture' silently.

But he was not the type who would always digest such 'unjust treatment' in silence. Instead, many a times, Sanyal used to 'retaliate' in ways as cunning as it could get.

~

Jogendranath Sarkar was the father-in-law of the landlord whose house the Sanyal family had rented.

An ardent flower-lover, Sarkar used to reside with his son-in-law's family on the first floor of the bi-storied building. He had set up a beautiful garden of exquisite flowers on clay-pots on the first floor verandah.

One day, Sarkar fallaciously accused a teenage Sanyal of having plucked flowers from the garden. Responding to the complaint, uncle Girija Govinda subjected Sanyal to rigorous punishment. This left Sanyal furious and he was now looking for an opportune moment to teach the 'old fellow' some lessons!

Not so long after, on a winter night, Sanyal retired to bed in their small bedroom, beside his uncle Girija Govinda. At midnight, he woke

up without raising an alarm and stealthily sneaked up to the first floor verandah through the window. He forayed into the old man's garden and broke as many flowerpots as he could.

After this revenge act, Sanyal climbed down quietly and slipped into the bed beside his uncle; he took to snoozing again. Uncle Girija Govinda was fast asleep and did not even get a wind of what had happened.

Next morning, the landlord's father-in-law woke up to the devastated state of his garden.

Recovering from the initial shock, he came wailing to Girija Govinda and accused Sanyal for the damages caused. Girija Govinda summarily rejected the charges and said that Sanyal could not have done this as he was sleeping next to him till late in the morning.

Notwithstanding the instant sadistic pleasure that Sanyal derived from the episode, he later 'felt terribly sorry' on seeing the old man sobbing the whole day in front of the devastated garden.

'I pledged not to indulge in such misdeed ever again in my life,' Sanyal had said.

~

Sanyal was naughty but not precocious at all. In fact, many a times he lagged behind his playmates in worldly knowledge. There were several such examples to that effect, such as the one incident that took place when he was in the eighth standard.

One afternoon, a playmate girl in Sanyal's group did not turn up for the regular sports. Upon enquiry, other playmates told Sanyal that the girl has eloped with a teacher of the local convent school.

That was the first time Sanyal learnt that girls do elope with males! Finding this too exciting not to share with his mother, on returning home he narrated her the entire episode. To his 'utter astonishment, instead of an appreciation' that Sanyal was hoping for, mother Nirmala scolded him in return!

~

Unlike the schools in the plains, educational institutions in the Darjeeling hills those days had no provision for a summer vacation.

Instead, to escape the severe cold spell, schools in the hills used to go on a two-month vacation in the winter. The convention continues even today.

Sanyal would eagerly wait for the winter vacation, during which their entire family would go for holidaying to the ancestral house at Salgaria in Pabna.

'To our family, a visit to Salgaria was almost an annual ritual. I used to enjoy this outing thoroughly,' Sanyal would recall.

CHAPTER THREE

The Second World War broke out in 1939, with Great Britain leading the Allied forces against Adolf Hitler's Germany.

Despite having no interest of its own, India, being a British colony, got entangled in the Great War and began counting on the consequences on its socio-economic life. As an obvious impact of the all-pervading war and widespread mis-governance by the British rulers, India soon began to pay a price.

During 1940–41, a massive scarcity of food and clothing hit the entire Bengal province. The crisis spilled onto the Darjeeling hills as well.

'Horrible were those days. Nepali women committing suicide for want of clothing had become a common phenomenon across the Darjeeling hills,' Sanyal would recall with a deep pang.

~

The Communists in India those days used to carry out their political activities through secret meetings. They also used to distribute pamphlets and booklets on important issues concerning India and the world. Booklets in Bengali, putting forth the Communists' views

about the World War: '*Kon Dike Paallaa Bhari,*' Who Has the Edge; '*Japan Ke Rukhte Hobe,*' Japan Must Be Stopped, etc. were in circulation at Kurseong as well.

Sanyal's father Annada Govinda, however, would never grab a copy of these booklets. This is because he strongly disapproved the Communist Party's vilification campaign against the leader of India's freedom movement, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

'The Communists call Subhash Chandra Bose *quisling*. I really wonder what a dumb lot they are,' Annada Govinda would tell Sanyal. *Quisling* is a Norwegian word for *traitor*; the Indian Communists branded Subhash Chandra Bose as one because of his association with Hitler.

Communist Party's persistent abuse of *Netaji* hurt teenager Sanyal's sentiments as well. As a result, he began to nurture a strong hostile feeling towards the Communists.

'One will be astonished to know that in my early youth, I was an anti-Communist to the core. This was solely because of the Communist Party's vilification campaign against *Netaji*,' Sanyal would clarify.

That was more so because like most Bengalis, for Sanyal too, Subhash Chandra Bose was the real hero of Indian freedom struggle. In fact, Sanyal was so fond of *Netaji* that as a child he had called on Bose at Giddha Pahar in Kurseong, where the British had kept him under house arrest for 3 months.

Sanyal had gone to Giddha Pahar with a junior schoolmate, Jyotirmoy Sarkar, to collect an autograph of Bose. They were readily obliged by *Netaji*, leaving Sanyal forever charmed by Bose's personality.

~

Like in the other parts of India, in Darjeeling too, the Communists started organising mass movements on issues affecting the common men's daily life. As a result, they were gradually succeeding in pulling public support to their favour.

During those tumultuous days, two cousins of Sanyal's mother Nirmala came to Kurseong on a tour. They were students of Rajshahi College in East Bengal and were associated with the newly formed Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA)—an affiliate of the Communist Party. They came to Kurseong as part of an IPTA

cultural troupe to campaign against food scarcity; they put up at Sanyal's house.

The troupe performed at the Bengali Association in Kurseong. Their performance and music moved Sanyal to a great extent, yet that was not enough to obliterate the strong anti-Communist feeling, which had penetrated deep in his psyche.

The same year, that is in 1942, the Communist Party succeeded to formally establish its organisation in Darjeeling hills. It became possible mainly because of the relentless efforts of Sushil Chatterjee, a provincial committee organiser (PCO) in the Communist Party.

Chatterjee was 'infamous' for taking the sides of the Nepalis in the event of a Nepali–Bengali tussle, an affair not very uncommon in Darjeeling hills those days.

This gave Sanyal one more reason to cling onto his anti-Communist stance. But years later, he would realise that 'on most of the occasions, Sushil Chatterjee was right in condemning the Bengalis.'

~

During the World War, the British rulers in India used to send the injured and exhausted Allied soldiers to Darjeeling for recuperation. The primary reason for choosing Darjeeling was the low temperature in the hills that suited the European soldiers most.

The inflow of Allied soldiers into Darjeeling had resulted in a socio-economic change in the hills. Numerous small- and medium-scale industries were set up to cater to the needs of the Allied soldiers and also that of the British administration in India.

As part of such initiatives, the British had set up a cork factory at Kurseong, adjacent to the Pushparani Roy Memorial HE School where Sanyal was studying. Corks produced in the factory were meant for use in water bottles that were solely meant for military supplies.

Most of the workers at this cork factory hailed from the East Bengal region in pre-Independent India.

'Dinesh *Da* was one such worker, who used to reside in our neighbourhood. Despite the huge age gap, I was then only 13 or 14 years old and he was 45, we somehow became friends.'

'Dinesh *Da* was a native of Dhaka and as he claimed, was an armed freedom fighter of the *Anushilan* group. Dinesh *Da* had lost his right

ear, apparently in an unsuccessful explosive attack on British officers,' Sanyal used to recall.

Dinesh *Da* would share anecdotes of the freedom struggle with Sanyal. He would apprise the teenage schoolboy about *Anushilan* group's relentless endeavours to free India from the clutches of the British. It was from Dinesh *Da* that Sanyal learnt in detail about the famous Chittagong arms loot.

The anecdotes would 'excite and inspire' Sanyal and inculcate in him a 'deep sense of respect' for the freedom fighters. Soon he became so addicted to Dinesh *Da*'s companionship, that not meeting him even one afternoon would make Sanyal feel as if the day had been wasted.

Sanyal used to believe that the long conversations with Dinesh *Da* and the subsequent germination of a 'deep sense of respect for the freedom fighters' were probably his 'first drift towards politics' though in a subtle way.

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The Allied soldiers used to ascend to the hills by Darjeeling Mail—a narrow-gauge train run by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR). DHR in those days used to be a private company owned by a British entrepreneur.

Teenage Sanyal—studying in the seventh standard—developed a new habit.

During the 45-minute tiffin-break at school, he would climb down all the way to the arterial Burdwan Road and arrive at the Kurseong railway station.

'The purpose was to catch a glimpse of the Allied soldiers, who on their way to Darjeeling used to halt at the Kurseong station. Since I spoke English, I would interact with them and try to learn about their nationality, mother tongue, etc. I used to find this very exciting,' Sanyal would recall.

There was another hobby that Sanyal was nurturing simultaneously; he developed an irresistible attraction towards foreign cars that the British officers drove along the hill roads.

Thus, in addition to catching a glimpse of the Allied soldiers, Sanyal would also watch out for imported cars. He would try to figure out their brand names and the countries where the cars had been manufactured.

During one such exploration, as Sanyal landed on Burdwan Road, his eyes met with 'quite an unusual scene'.

'Tying up their waists with a long rope, the police were herding on foot a group of five or six individuals towards the Kurseong sub-divisional court. The group was marching ahead shouting "*Vande Mataram*...,"' etc.

'Another group of 20-odd individuals—who were not tied up—were following them, reverberating the *Vande Mataram* slogan. As a matter of great astonishment, the second group was also spitting at the police,' Sanyal recalled.

He had 'no clue' as to the identity of those tied up or why the second group was spitting at the police. But Sanyal found it 'very exciting and daring' that the 20-odd men could dare to spit at the cops, whom everyone was so scared of.

In spontaneity, he joined the second group and marched along spitting at the police. It was not that Sanyal was aware why the marchers were doing what they did and 'anyone in the group hardly paid an attention' to his joining them.

In fact, until then Sanyal did not even know the meaning or connotation of '*Vande Mataram*', which the group was mongering about with utmost vigour; he had joined the marchers out of sheer 'curiosity and adventurism'.

The march ended at the Kurseong subdivisional court, but the group continued to shout slogans in the court premise.

Still clueless about the goings-on, Sanyal halted at the court gate and was trying to make out some sense that somebody pulled his ear from behind!

~

'Turning back in surprise, I discovered that it was *Dambarpaji*.'

'My dad was a clerk at the Kurseong court and *Dambarpaji* was a peon in his office. He was a cordial man to the core and very affectionate towards me. *Dambarpaji* soon took me to my father,' Sanyal recalled.

In the meantime, the then Kurseong subdivisional officer (SDO) Mr Scott had summoned Sanyal's father Annada Govinda to his chamber. Scott had spotted Sanyal with the protesters and immediately called in Annada Govinda to caution him about the teenager's activities.

Scott knew Sanyal as the latter often used to visit the court with father Annada Govinda. On several occasions, Sanyal had interacted with him and the British officer had gifted him chocolates.

Annada Govinda had just returned from Scott's chamber when *Dambarpaji* produced Sanyal before him. Needless to mention, the timing was terribly wrong!

Annada Govinda immediately lost his cool and served Sanyal a few slaps. He then asked *Dambarpaji* to put 'the errant boy in the nearby jail'!

Lugging Sanyal on his back, *Dambarpaji* marched towards the Kurseong Sub-Jail. Sanyal had turned cold at the very prospect of being locked up behind the bars and was sobbing continuously.

Exhausted of crying, he fell asleep midway. When Sanyal woke up again, he was still on *Dambarpaji*'s shoulder and they were about to enter their Bhalu Busty residence!

Years later, Sanyal could relate that the incident took place on 9 August 1942. The protest march was part of Mahatma Gandhi's nation-wide Quit India Movement.

~

Notwithstanding the wide-ranging political developments taking place in the outside world, at home, none in the Sanyal family 'would discuss politics'.

This is despite the fact that the Indian freedom movement was already at its peak. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's call to arms to achieve freedom had caught the popular Bengali imagination by fancy.

Sanyal family's apparent reluctance was not because they were less passionate about the freedom struggle but it was due to Annada Govinda's professional attachment with the British Raj.

Yet Annada Govinda could hardly suppress curiosity about the fast evolving political scenario. So much so that on returning home from office, he would spend every evening at neighbour Dr Moni Mohan Sarkar's study. Only Sarkar had a radio set in the entire neighbourhood.

Sarkar and Annada Govinda would eagerly listen to radio bulletins for news on Subhash Chandra Bose's fresh moves or stay hooked to his famous radio speech from Berlin. They used to analyse threadbare *Netaji*'s each and every move.

Very often than not, young Sanyal would accompany his father to Dr Sarkar's house. He would lend an ear to their conversations and the radio bulletins.

'It was evident that my father and Dr Sarkar considered Bose to be a real leader. They revered him to a great extent and were completely against Mahatma Gandhi and his policies.'

'Many of these sentiments were getting transmitted into me,' Sanyal had explained.

~

In 1944, the Communist Party opened a branch office at Kurseong. The office was located on the ground floor of a wooden building that fell on the way down from Sanyal's house to Burdwan Road.

'Till then, I was extremely outraged against the Communists. Hence, without any provocation, I gathered a group of local youths and broke down the signboard of the newly opened Communist Party office,' Sanyal had testified.

CHAPTER FOUR

Despite having grown up in Darjeeling hills since infancy, Sanyal's father and uncles used to consider Salgaria in East Bengal to be their native place. Annada Govinda's emotional attachment to the native village was so strong that, in 1946—just a year before his scheduled retirement from government job—he conceived a plan to relocate the entire Sanyal family to Salgaria.

Annada Govinda discussed the plan with his younger siblings and they readily nodded in favour of the family's relocation. Going a step further, they also chalked out plans for enrolling the children, including Sanyal, at the Edward College in Pabna for higher studies post-matriculation.

In pre-Independent India, Edward College was ranked third next to Rajshahi College, now in Bangladesh, and the Presidency College in Calcutta.

That very year, that is in 1946, Sanyal was preparing for matriculation exam. He was an avid reader of two newspapers—*The Nation* published in English and daily *Paschimbanga* in Bengali edited by Sarat Chandra Bose.

Going through the news on political developments, Sanyal could draw the inference that East Bengal region would become a part of

the proposed Islamic nation—Pakistan. Thus, he objected to Annada Govinda's plan to relocate the family to Salgaria.

'But *Baba* outrightly rejected my objection and ridiculed me saying that I seemed to know a little too much. Adamant about his plans, he instead undertook a massive renovation drive for the Salgaria house incurring a handsome expenditure,' Sanyal would recall.

Sanyal failed in the matriculation exam in 1946 and got a *back paper* in Sanskrit. Father Annada Govinda and the other family members insisted that he clear the *back paper* under the *compartmental* system, wherein an examinee is allowed to appear for only one or two subjects that she/he had failed, instead of taking the entire examination afresh. But Sanyal decided to sit for the entire exam in the next session.

~

Towards the end of 1946, with the day of his retirement barely a few months away, Sanyal's father Annada Govinda was transferred to the subdivisional court in Siliguri.

Consequent to this, Annada Govinda moved to Siliguri but refrained from relocating his family from Kurseong. He put up in a relative's place at Babupara in Siliguri and went to office from there.

The calender moved fast and 1947 arrived in its due course. Sanyal appeared for the matriculation exam for the second time and this time, he came out successful securing second division.

In February 1947, Annada Govinda retired from government service. It was only after this that the entire Sanyal family shifted its base from Kurseong to Siliguri. They rented a house at the erstwhile Kathalbagan area near Siliguri police station; the plan to permanently relocate the family to the native village of Salgaria was still alive in Annada Govinda's mind.

But then came the August of 1947, the month of India's divided independence! Sanyal might have failed the matriculation exam in the first attempt but his forecast about East Bengal going to Pakistan came true and Annada Govinda's cherished dream to relocate the family to Salgaria died abruptly. The native village of the Sanyals was now an alien land, too far for Annada Govinda's dreams to reach out. The Sanyals stayed back in Siliguri forever.

CHAPTER FIVE

After matriculation, Sanyal was now to go to college, but where? In those days, Siliguri did not have any college; in fact, in the entire Darjeeling district, there was only one college—the St. Joseph's College at Darjeeling town.

Sanyal was not willing to study in the hills. He made it categorical to his parents that he would study anywhere in the plains but would not go back to the hills.

Thus, in mid-1947, father Annada Govinda got him admitted at Ananda Chandra College, located at a distance of about 50 km in the neighbourhood district town of Jalpaiguri. The college was barely in the fifth year of its existence and was operating out of a building near to the Race Course at Jalpaiguri.

Sanyal got enrolled in the first year of the Intermediate of Science (ISc) course. Annada Govinda arranged for Sanyal's accommodation at his uncle's residence at Ukil Para area in Jalpaiguri.

'The college was located at quite a distance from Ukil Para. In those days, rickshaws or other modes of public transport were not very common in Jalpaiguri; I used to walk all through to the college,' Sanyal would point out.

The Communist Party of India's Jalpaiguri district office was located in the same Ukil Para area. On his way to college, Sanyal would pass by the Communist Party office every day and suppress an indomitable desire to step inside the political hub.

Whenever he encountered such a desire, Sanyal would restrain himself reminding that those were the Communists who had called *Netaji* a *Quisling*. The unquestionable loyalty for *Netaji* stood between him and the Communist Party.

Probably it was this allegiance for Subhash Chandra Bose that to evade the strong inner pull for the Communist Party, Sanyal began frequenting the Forward Bloc office located at Panda Para area in Jalpaiguri town.

'Sachin Lahiri was the Forward Bloc district secretary then. I introduced myself to him and started visiting their office almost every evening,' Sanyal would recall.

But this stint with the Forward Bloc lasted barely for a month; Sanyal soon came across the 'spontaneous realisation' that 'Forward Bloc has nothing new to offer and was only cashing in on the popularity of Subhash Chandra Bose.' What appeared to him more cliché was the party leaders' 'invoking of *Netaji* over anything and everything under the Sun'.

Also, Sanyal did not agree with Forward Bloc's insistence that Bose was still alive. Sanyal had always been very argumentative by nature and swallowing anything without being convinced by adequate reasoning was the last thing he would do. Thus, notwithstanding his deep reverence for Bose, Sanyal believed, *Netaji* was dead.

'One day I asked the district secretary point-blank, if Forward Bloc had anything else to say other than exploiting *Netaji*'s legacy time and again. Mr Lahiri could not give a clear answer, rather took umbrage at my posture.'

From the next day, Sanyal stopped visiting the Forward Bloc office once and for all.

~

Sanyal got introduced to freedom fighter Chitta Ranjan Das Sharma at Jalpaiguri. Sharma was quick to gauge his affinity for *Netaji*.

'One day, Sharma *Babu* proposed a trip to Calcutta promising that he would take me to *Netaji*'s house in the city. When I told him that my dad would not grant me the train fare, Sharma *Babu* readily offered to sponsor.'

Accompanied by Sharma *Babu,* Sanyal set out for Calcutta. That was his maiden trip to the city and as obvious, young Sanyal was very excited.

On reaching Calcutta, Sanyal paid a visit to *Netaji*'s house on Elgin Road; by then the house had been converted into a museum. He returned to Jalpaiguri after two days, lamenting not having seen 'enough of Calcutta'. He wanted to visit the city again.

Not very long after, Sanyal came to know that a national convention of the All India Congress Committee was going to take place in Calcutta in December 1947. He instantly chalked out a plan for attending the event.

'My primary interest was to catch a glimpse of the Congress party's national leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. They were scheduled to address an open rally at the Monument Ground in Calcutta on 30 December,' Sanyal had recalled.

This time, Sanyal set out for Calcutta on his own and that too without informing the relatives in whose house he was staying in Jalpaiguri.

On the evening of 29 December, he boarded the general compartment of a train bound for Sealdah station in Calcutta without buying a ticket and reached the city the next morning. On his own in the metropolis, Sanyal made it to the Monument Ground by seeking directions from passers-by.

'It was the biggest public gathering I had ever seen. The venue was filled to the brim with crowd. To catch a closer view of the Congress leaders seated on the dais, I tried pushing my way through the swelling crowd. Unable to withstand the pressure, I stumbled on the ground,' Sanyal recalled.

After lying on the ground for a few minutes, he tried stabilising himself amidst the crowd only to discover that his left arm had got fractured. The broken limb was now 'hanging like a bow'.

~

Trapped in the maddening crowd, Sanyal cried out for help but nobody paid a heed. Instead, with the constant push and pull of the crowd, he now found himself close to the enclosure demarcated for VIPs.

Sanyal was sweating in terrible pain. He somehow managed to put off his coat but unable to lug it, dropped the apparel on the ground. He made a futile attempt to sit down on the ground but found no space.

'Unable to bear the pain, in desperation, I bit on the arm of a man standing next to me. The unexpected gesture struck the man by surprise and he stumbled onto another man. This facilitated me the much needed space.'

'Without wasting a moment, I sat down on the ground. Upon stabilising a little, I crawled my way through the iron-barricade, landing up right into the VIP enclosure. I did so because, I knew, it was only the Congress volunteers who could facilitate me the much needed medical intervention. The moment I explained the volunteers about my physical condition, they lugged me towards a car,' Sanyal recalled.

While being shifted from the VIP enclosure to the car by Congress volunteers, Sanyal caught up a close glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi seated on the dais.

~

The volunteers took him to the emergency ward at the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital. It was already late in the afternoon. When the on-duty physician came to attend on Sanyal, both the patient and the doctor recognised each other instantly.

The physician was Himadri Sarkar, the son of Sudhar Chandra Sarkar, in whose house at Kurseong the Sanyals were tenants.

'Himadri *Da* started pestering me to know with whom and why I had come to Calcutta. He was also curious to know as to how I had sustained the fracture. But when I kept mum despite his repeated query, Himadri *Da* gave up and administered a plaster on my fractured arm.'

'It is already too late today; I have administered a temporary plaster on your fracture but you would have to come again tomorrow for an elaborate treatment. By the way, where are you putting up in the city?' Himadri asked Sanyal.

Sanyal again kept mum. He did not disclose the fact that he had no place to spend the night in Calcutta. Instead, promising a visit the next day as suggested, Sanyal took leave from the medical college hospital.

In reality, Sanyal had some other plan in mind. He was now being afraid of the fact that he came to Calcutta without informing his parents or for that matter anyone else. On top of it, he has now got his arm fractured; put together, all these are sure to bring him some severe reprimand back home at Siliguri.

Considering the pros and cons, Sanyal arrived at the conclusion that his priority was to reach Jalpaiguri at the earliest and not availing an elaborate treatment at the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital.

He soon hurried his way to Sealdah railway station and to his fortune, succeeded to catch a Jalpaiguri-bound passenger train that very evening. This time too, he was in a general compartment and was travelling without a ticket.

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Sanyal reached Jalpaiguri the next morning and straightway went to his relative's house. They criticised him for disappearing without intimation, but were more surprised to see his plastered arm slinging from the neck with a strip of cloth. Sanyal narrated them a cock and bull story about sustaining the fracture and succeeded to convince them.

'With there being no trace of you, we had sent in queries to your parents in Siliguri. They are in extreme anxiety over your sudden disappearance,' the relatives told Sanyal.

In those days, telephone was a rare facility in Jalpaiguri–Siliguri; only the highly placed government officials or exorbitantly affluent businessmen had access to telephone. Common people had no access to any other modes of communications apart from the postal service or a personal courier.

To convey his parents the news of his reappearance, Sanyal left for Siliguri by bus the same day. Back at home, he was subjected to another round of condemnation; he repeated the concocted story about the fracture in his arm.

Sanyal consciously avoided telling his parents about the doctor's prescription for an elaborate treatment. He never availed a proper plaster for the fractured limb and owing to this his left arm acquired a permanent bent.

CHAPTER SIX

Enmeshed in political quest, Sanyal appeared for the ISc exam in 1948 only to come out unsuccessful. He failed in chemistry.

Father Annada Govinda advised him to reattempt ISc in the next session but Sanyal insisted otherwise. He expressed unwillingness to continue with the studies and said that he wants to get into a government job instead. On hearing this, Annada Govinda ridiculed him saying that none would offer a job to a mere matriculate.

But Sanyal was unperturbed; he launched a concentrated effort to fetch a government job at the earliest possible.

~

On 25 March 1948, the provincial government of West Bengal imposed a ban on the Communist Party—better known as the CPI. Bidhan Chandra Roy was then the Chief Minister of the Congress-led state government.

The development struck Sanyal with utter bewilderment. 'The question that cropped up in my mind was: why on earth a political party would be banned in Independent India, which was now free from

the clutches of the British? I was desperately looking for an answer,' he recalled.

After his family's relocation to Siliguri, Sanyal had befriended one Rakhal Choudhury, an activist of the All India Student Federation (AISF)—the student wing of CPI.

Rakhal was a resident of Babupara in Siliguri. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which, in those days, used to be considered a deadly disease. But Rakhal was fortunate to have recuperated completely following a prolonged treatment at the Kurseong Sanatorium.

As was obvious, someone being cured of tuberculosis used to create quite a buzz; when Rakhal returned home healthy, a stranger Sanyal called on him at his residence 'out of mere curiosity'. In the process, they ended up becoming friends.

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One evening, while rendezvousing at Rakhal's residence, they started analysing the state government's ban on CPI from a critical point of view. As the discussion progressed, Rakhal proposed floating a secret group for maintaining links with the Communists.

He asked Sanyal to take the lead but Sanyal declined the responsibility stating that he did not know any Communist leader in Siliguri. But Rakhal stuck to his gun by countering that he would introduce Sanyal to a Communist leader who was known to him.

Around the same time, Sanyal came across Sunil Sarkar, a friend of his father Annada Govinda. Sarkar was a member of the Bengal Provincial Trade Union Congress (BPTUC)—a workers' union affiliated to the Congress party.

Despite being a Congressman, Sarkar was inclined towards the Communist Party. He proposed Sanyal for joining the CPI together. They befriended Amal Kulacharya, a teenager who had just appeared for the matriculation exam and was awaiting results.

Soon joined them another young man who was employed with a local voluntary organisation named the *Semi-literary Organisation.*

Thus, Sanyal, Rakhal, Amal, Sunil Sarkar and their young friend ganged up and floated an underground pro-Communist organisation. They named it *Jana Raksha Samity* or the Public Protection Committee.

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At Jalpaiguri Road in Siliguri, there was a sawmill called the *Bengal Veneer Sawmill.* Sunil Sarkar was in-charge of the BPTUC affiliated workers' union there.

Rakhal proposed that the first task for *Jana Raksha Samity* would be to bring the sawmill union to its fold. Other members of the group readily approved the idea. Of all of them, Sanyal was most excited at the prospect of being able to associate with the workers.

During the same time round, he met Sudhangshu Sengupta, a CPI activist hailing from Dhaka in East Bengal, who was in hiding in Siliguri. Sengupta's younger brother was the trade union secretary at *Bengal Veneer Sawmill.* This helped consolidate their ties further and the *Jana Raksha Samity* grew in strength.

The *Samity* started pasting posters across Siliguri opposing the ban on CPI. The posters also condemned the police atrocities being carried out on Communist activists across Bengal.

'Rakhal was an expert in scribbling posters. We used to pick up issues from news items published in *The Nation* and *Paschimbanga* and paste the posters at night to evade the police,' Sanyal recalled.

The posters sympathising the CPI would create a ruffle among the police functionaries of Siliguri; but despite their ardent attempts, they failed to zero down on the people behind the posters.

~

Sanyal was simultaneously carrying on with his desperate search for a government job. And owing to this perseverance, towards the end of 1948, he finally landed up in a job at the Kalimpong subdivisional office in Darjeeling hills.

Sanyal was recruited as a revenue collection clerk. He got the job by appearing for a written test, in which he stood second among all contenders.

Instead of renting an accommodation in Kalimpong where his office was located, Sanyal opted for lodging in a hotel at the serene hill town. He took on rent a single-bed room on monthly basis and ate the meals supplied by the hotel.

Sanyal would eagerly wait for Saturday, which was a half day at office. By noon, as soon as the office closed, he would hurry down to Siliguri; that was more to accomplish his political activities than meeting his parents.

From Saturday evening through Sunday night, Sanyal would stay enmeshed in *Jana Raksha Samity* meetings, pasting posters, carrying out trade union activities and so on. He would return to Kalimpong on Monday morning to attend office. The same routine will repeat week after week.

It was during those days, while being associated with the pro-Communist *Jana Raksha Samity* that Sanyal was gradually drawing close to the CPI. That was no less a remarkable transformation; he once hated the Communists for branding *Netaji* Subhash Chandra Bose as *quisling*.

'The desire to join the Communist Party was not the outcome of any ideological motivation. Rather it was the result of the restlessness and quest for something new, which is usually associated with the advent of youth. I was desperate for something stimulating, something very fresh but had no idea what that could be,' Sanyal would say.

He would also admit without the slightest hesitation that in his college days, even at repeated attempts, he had failed to make a sense of the *Bolshevik Party-r Itihas*, a Bengali translation of Joseph Stalin's *History of the Bolshevik Party*.

'That was the only Communist literature I had read till then and having failed to understand any part of the book, there was no question of getting ideologically motivated,' Sanyal would clarify putting the issue in proper perspective.

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In 1949, the police opened fire at agitating Communist protestors at Bowbazar Street in Calcutta, killing five activists on the spot: Latika, Pratibha, Amiya, Geeta and a male Communist activist. This triggered widespread repercussions across the length and breadth of West Bengal.

'How could the police of Independent India shoot at political activists?' an outraged Sanyal thought. The incident came as the final push and he was now clear both in his heart and mind that he wanted to join the Communist Party.

As Sanyal and his co-activists in the *Jana Raksha Samity* were simmering over the Calcutta police firing, a befitting opportunity came their way to vent their ire, almost coincidentally.

They came to know that the state Chief Minister Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy would be visiting Siliguri on 18 December to inaugurate

a public library near the Siliguri subdivisional court. *Jana Raksha Samity* decided holding a demonstration on the day of the Chief Minister's visit.

Sunil Sarkar proposed that to deceive the police, they should carry the Congress flag at the demonstration. But Sanyal vehemently opposed the idea and this triggered a controversy within the organisation. The matter was finally settled by opting for black flags instead.

Now, there were two important tasks at hand: first, to ensure adequate public participation in the demonstration and second, ensuring a backing from the CPI leadership in Siliguri.

Rakhal entrusted his sister Renuka with the task of drawing women participants to the rally. Sunil Sarkar assured bringing in a sizeable number of workers from the *Bengal Veneer Sawmill*. The task to ensure CPI's backing for the demonstration fell upon Sanyal.

Sanyal had heard of a CPI leader, Runu Mitra, who lived at Khudiram Pally (Mahananda Para) in Siliguri. One evening, he called on Mitra at his residence and briefed him on the proposed agitation.

'Astonishingly, instead of appreciating our endeavour, Runu *Babu* lambasted me with bitter words. He accused me of being an agent of the Congress and clarified that there was no question of the CPI backing the proposed demonstration by any means,' Sanyal recalled.

Dejected, he returned to his fellow activists. After a threadbare discussion, they decided to organise the demonstration on their own.

~

On the D-Day of 18 December 1949, taking everyone by surprise, *Jana Raksha Samity* launched the protest march from Babupara with over 150 participants.

'Of all, perhaps the most surprised was I myself. It was on finding that majority of the participants in the rally were from Babupara, which in those days was one of the most reactionary localities in Siliguri,' Sanyal would explain.

The rally encountered the first police resistance in front of the Siliguri police station, but the participants outnumbered the handful of cops and marched ahead vigorously. The second resistance came at Hospital More.

This time the police presence was quite sizeable. As the protesters tried to march ahead forcibly, the men in uniform resorted to caning.

Getting over the momentary bewilderment, the marchers retaliated with brick and stone pelting.

While the skirmish between the police and the protesters was on, Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy's convoy was passing by the area on its way to the inauguration venue for the public library. Owing to the massive hullabaloo on the street, the convoy slowed down a little.

'Seizing this opportunity, our activist Amal Kulacharya picked up a brick and thrust it down heavily on the rear-screen of the Chief Minister's Ambassador car. Amal failed to inflict an injury on Bidhan Chandra Roy, but when he pulled out his hand from the smashed rear-screen, the skin of his arm had almost peeled off. Amal was bleeding profusely,' Sanyal recalled narrating the breathtaking incident.

Awestruck, Sanyal was watching Amal's *daredevilry* from some distance. On turning back, he found that most of the fellow protesters were gone. Everyone had fled to evade police retaliation even as the skirmish drew some spontaneous support from the passers-by.

A milkman was passing by the area in a bicycle, carrying fresh milk in a large aluminium container. Finding the baton-wielding policemen chase the protesters, he disembarked from his bicycle and hit a policeman with the aluminium container exerting as much force he could yield.

Sanyal was left alone to take care of an injured Amal Kulacharya. There was a government hospital nearby, but he realised that it would be suicidal to take Amal there for the police would arrest both of them.

Sanyal lugged Amal on his back and negotiating through the lanes and by-lanes, hurried towards the old fish market where a dispensary run by Dr L.N. Chatterjee was located. The physician was known to Sanyal.

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Dr Chatterjee washed Amal's wounds, administered a few stitches and then wrapped a bandage over it. But out of fear of the police, he repeatedly asked Sanyal never to make a mention of this to anyone.

Sanyal dropped Amal at his house and then went home at dusk. That very night, the officer-in-charge (OC) of Siliguri police station

summoned Sanyal's father Annada Govinda. The officer narrated the day's violent demonstration and briefed him about Sanyal's role in the agitation. Sanyal could face arrest for demonstrating against the Chief Minister, he cautioned.

Annada Govinda returned home red-faced and vent out the anger on Sanyal by subjecting him to severe whipping. The incident created a ruffle in the family; hearing about the arrest threat by the police, mother Nirmala wept all night.

'My relationship with *Baba* was never a sweet-coated one. But after he had bashed me that night, what remained between us was only a need-based relationship,' Sanyal would point out.

~

Early next morning, Sanyal left for Kalimpong to attend office. A few days later, in the second week of January 1950, he was transferred from Kalimpong to the Siliguri subdivisional office.

Sanyal had barely attended office in Siliguri for two to three days when the police arrested him in connection with the demonstration against Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy.

Sanyal was booked under non-bailable sections of the Indian Penal Code and on being produced before a local court, was remanded to judicial custody at the Siliguri Subdivisional Jail.

'That was the first time I went to jail and this marked the beginning of frequent jail terms that would almost become a routine for me in the years to come,' he would explain.

At the Siliguri Subdivisional Jail, he met CPI leaders Sauresh Mitra, Radha Gobinda Das, Molin Dey and Mahendra Das. They were under preventive arrest ahead of India's first Republic Day celebrations scheduled for 26 January 1950.

All of them but especially Sauresh Mitra quizzed Sanyal about the activities of *Jana Raksha Samity* and its future plans. In the course of discussion, when Sanyal expressed willingness to join the CPI, Mitra asked him to get in touch after being released from jail.

The CPI leaders were set free after about a month; Sanyal was released on bail not before he had spent three months behind the bars.

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On being released from jail, Sanyal did not report back to office. This marked an abrupt end to his brief professional stint with the government of West Bengal. He now began attending the garment shop that his father had started at Mahabirsthan in Siliguri post-retirement.

Only a couple of days into this, Sanyal received a secret communiqué from CPI leader Sauresh Mitra. Mitra called him for a meeting at an isolated location near the Terai School at Deshabandhu Para.

On the scheduled evening when Sanyal turned up at the designated venue, Mitra grilled him for over an hour to gauge his sincerity about joining the Communist Party. After the grilling session, Mitra took leave promising to get back to Sanyal at the earliest possible.

About a week later, he surfaced again and took Sanyal to Monoranjan Roy, a provincial committee organiser of the CPI in-charge of the party organisation in Darjeeling district. Following a brief discussion, Roy offered Sanyal a membership of the CPI and Sanyal accepted it quite delightfully.

Sanyal became a member of the CPI in April 1950. Sunil Sarkar and Rakhal Choudhury—two of Sanyal's fellow activists in the *Jana Raksha Samity* soon followed suit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

On joining CPI, the first assignment that party leaders bestowed on Sanyal was to hand over a classified letter to Charu Mazumdar.

Mazumdar was a prominent leader of the CPI Jalpaiguri district committee and was lodged at the Buxa Prison in Dooars after being arrested by police in connection with the Communist Movement.

Buxa Prison was actually a fort of an erstwhile kingdom that governed the Dooars region; it was the British who converted the Buxa Fort into a prison with the sole purpose to lodge political prisoners involved in the Indian freedom movement. Post-Independence, the government of free India continued with the practice of lodging political prisoners in this isolated fort located deep inside the Buxa Tiger Reserve.

The CPI leadership in Siliguri got a tip off that Charu Mazumdar would be soon relocated from Buxa Prison to the Central Jail in Jalpaiguri. He will be taken to Jalpaiguri by a train and on its way, the train will halt for a few minutes at the Siliguri Town station, the tip off said.

Sanyal was entrusted the task to hand over a classified letter to Mazumdar; the job was to be accomplished by evading a strong police vigil expected to be put in place at the Siliguri Town station.

Sanyal was chosen for the purpose because, being a new recruit in the party, he was not known to the police as a CPI activist. Four seasoned comrades were also roped in with Sanyal for the mission but only to assist him from a safer distance.

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On the D-Day, Sanyal was both feeling nervous and excited at the same breath.

Nervous at the thought that he will have to accomplish the task evading a strict police surveillance; excited because, it was the first time he would be meeting Charu Mazumdar, whose extraordinary qualities he had heard about so much.

'Many legends—some fictitious and some true—were in circulation about Charu *Da's* extraordinary genius. These included his reported ability to make an exact forecast about his exam score in college days; being able to read through huge voluminous books overnight; leaving his opponents awestruck with logical arguments on any topic under the sun; daredevil attitude and so on and so forth. He was also well revered in the Communist circle for his role in the Tebhaga Movement of 1946,' Sanyal would explain.

To speak of personal experience, although Sanyal had not met Mazumdar before, he did once hear Mazumdar's stimulating speech during a public meeting at Kachhari Road in Siliguri. Since that day, Sanyal had been nurturing a strong desire to meet Mazumdar in person, someday. The opportunity was now at close hand!

~

Accompanied by four comrades, Sanyal reached the Siliguri town station around noon. He waited under the platform-shed; the associate comrades positioned themselves in four different corners of the station. All of them were now waiting for the train.

A few minutes later, a train with Charu Mazumdar on-board chugged into the station. Sanyal spotted Mazumdar seated by the window of a compartment densely guarded by armed policemen and went towards the compartment in utmost caution.

Walking across the platform, Sanyal was now barely at a hand's distance from Mazumdar; he looked straight into his eyes and offered a silent greeting. Mazumdar reciprocated. Sanyal took a careful glance

on both his sides and cautiously took out the letter hidden in his waist under the pyjama.

He had hardly released the letter on Mazumdar's palm that a policeman guarding the compartment noticed the exchange. The policeman instantly snatched the letter and was about to sound an alarm that Sanyal made a quick retreat. Sanyal passed an emergency distress signal to the four associate comrades.

The signal was deciphered rightly and all the five of them fled from the railway station at the quickest possible. To negate the risk of being chased down by the police, each of them took to separate directions. By the time police plunged into action, Sanyal and his comrades were already at a safe distance.

After a while, police gave up the chase. The train carrying Charu Mazumdar rolled out of Siliguri Town station for the Jalpaiguri Central Jail.

~

The escape from Siliguri Town station did not last long; about a month later, the police Intelligence wing nabbed Sanyal and his four comrades. They were booked on charges of indulging in anti-national activities and were sent to the Jalpaiguri Central Jail. That was in the summer of 1950.

And at this very Jalpaiguri Central Jail, Sanyal's long treasured dream to meet Charu Mazumdar finally came true. He also met a few other top-ranked CPI leaders who were lodged there.

'Though our cells were separate, being political prisoners, we were allowed to assemble in the jail atrium twice a day—at dawn and dusk. Seizing this opportunity, we would indulge in political discussions. Being a novice, I was always an ardent listener; Charu *Da* on the other hand was the senior most comrade and used to occupy the centre-stage as a speaker,' Sanyal recalled.

Time passed by; when Sanyal came out on bail after three months, the winter of 1950 was not far away.

~

Coming out of jail, at daytime Sanyal would assist his father in running the Mahabirsthan garment shop. The shop was already on the wane. In the evening, he would secretly carryout political activities.

'I had opposed the decision when *Baba* was planning to start the garment shop. My reasoning was that trading requires certain amount of knack and skill, which cannot be acquired overnight. Moreover, being an aged person, *Baba* would not be able to keep track of the latest fashion in demand.'

'But being the kind of person he was, *Baba* went ahead with his plan. Now a year later, in ratification of my observations, the shop started accumulating huge losses,' Sanyal pointed out.

~

In December 1950, the district organising committee (DOC) of the CPI organised a clandestine meet in Darjeeling town. *Kakababu* Muzzaffar Ahmed and Snehangshu Acharya were present in the meeting as state observers.

At the instruction of senior district leaders, Sanyal also attended the DOC meeting as a special invitee and it was there that he was unanimously inducted in the DOC as a member.

It was a very significant development in Sanyal's political life; he was now the youngest member of the Darjeeling DOC, the supreme body of the Communist Party at district level.

Almost simultaneously, came another relieving news; the government of West Bengal lifted the ban on CPI in early 1951.

The move paved the way for party workers to plunge into organisational activities with a renewed vigour. Sanyal started organising small public gatherings and street corners across Siliguri town on issues concerning the civic life.

'That was my first hands-on experience in direct mass contact and public speaking. The response from the people was indicative that they were simmering against ill governance; people were craving for some radical change,' Sanyal recalled.

~

Sanyal's inclusion in the CPI Darjeeling DOC came as a real boost. He was now more active than before. He discontinued attending his father's garment shop and got enmeshed in party activities from dawn to dusk.

Holding meetings with the party's auxiliary groups (AG), organising street corners and demonstrations on relevant socio-economic

issues became a routine. In recognition of Sanyal's drive and dedication, senior party leader Sourin Bose advised him to become a party whole-timer in February 1951.

A whole-timer in Communist organisation is the one who gets detached from all professional and family obligations and dedicates himself or herself for the party organisation 24 hours × 365 days. Usually, a whole-timer does not stay with his/her family; instead lodges in the party commune or at the residence of another party comrade.

Thus at the suggestion of becoming a whole-timer, Sanyal found himself in a dilemma.

'No doubt I was devoting all my time and energy in working for the party and was enjoying the engagement thoroughly, but I was unable to come to terms with the idea of deserting my family forever. I was also afraid, my family, especially my mother, would not allow this to happen.

With the dilemma ruffling my inner-self, I sought time till the *Durga Puja* to make up my mind. The *Puja* was slated for October that year,' Sanyal pointed out.

~

October 1951, it seemed, arrived a little early. The *Durga Puja* was knocking at the door but Sanyal could not yet make up his mind on whether to become a CPI whole-timer or not.

In mid-October, senior CPI leaders convened a meeting of all prospective whole-timers; the meeting was convened at a party sympathiser's house at Mallaguri area in Siliguri and Sanyal was asked to remain present.

Despite being in dilemma, Sanyal turned up at the meeting along with fellow comrades: Keshav Sarkar, Murlidhar Sinha, Chunilal Goala, Nagen Das, Panchanan Sarkar and a few others.

Senior CPI leaders present to address the closed-door meeting were Charu Mazumdar, Satyendra Narayan Mazumdar and Monaranjan Roy. By then, Charu Mazumdar had become the district secretary of the CPI Jalpaiguri unit.

'Charu *Da* was the last speaker that evening. He started off on a high pitch, infusing instant energy into the discussion. He spoke at

length on the sufferings of the poor and the peasantry and stressed on the need for a radical change in the existing political system.'

'I was battling with my dilemma when Charu *Da* began his speech. But by the time he summed up, I found myself completely enthralled and motivated. I was now resolute to become a whole-timer of the party,' Sanyal recalled.

Subsequent to this, a few days before the *Durga Puja* of 1951, Sanyal became a whole-timer in the CPI.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Whole-timer Sanyal was assigned the charge of a new CPI office at Matigara, a rural cluster on the outskirts of Siliguri town. He was asked to shoulder the responsibility jointly with Sunil Sarkar, a co-activist since the *Jana Raksha Samity* days.

Obliging the instruction of the party higher-ups, Sanyal and Sarkar soon moved to Matigara. The party office doubled up as their shelter; there was also a small makeshift kitchen attached to the office room.

'It was entirely a new experience. Away from the protected comfort of family, I was now on my own. It felt like I had matured overnight,' Sanyal recalled.

Their main job was to utilise the party office as a base to supervise the activities of fellow comrades and party sympathisers in the area. Sarkar was given the additional task of cooking meals for the two of them; but after three to four days, he threw up his hands. The responsibility automatically passed onto Sanyal.

Cooking meals on one hand and on the other, traversing across the villages to organise the farmers, Sanyal was really having a busy time. He was thoroughly enjoying this first-ever experience of interacting with farmers and common villagers.

'But my first tryst with reality came only in early 1952. One day, during a peasant meeting at a village called Champasari, the *chowkidar*s of landlord George Mahabert unleashed a sudden attack on us. We were totally unprepared for the assault, but somehow managed to defend ourselves.'

'That was the first time I came face-to-face with the landlord gentry and realised, how ferocious the reactionaries could get to deny the working class its justified rights,' Sanyal said.

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In January 1952, the government announced holding simultaneously the General Election in the country and the Assembly poll in West Bengal. That was the first General Election in Independent India and the CPI decided to participate in the electoral fray.

Sanyal was asked to move to Naxalbari—a rural business hub located at a distance of about 25 km from Silliguri town and surrounded by a number of tea estates. He was to lead the party's election campaign there. Moving into Naxalbari, Sanyal found temporary accommodation in the house of party sympathiser Jiten Singh and plunged into activity immediately.

'That was my first stint at Naxalbari. On that occasion, I stayed there for about 25 days,' Sanyal would point out.

With the support of fellow comrades, he started holding small election meetings in the adjacent tea estates. The aim was to win over the support of the plantation workers.

One day, in the course of electioneering, Sanyal and his group members ventured into a tea estate named Paharghoomia. They were erecting a makeshift dais for the meeting that a British manager of the tea estate sent in private guards asking them not to hold any gathering inside the estate.

'When we refused to comply, the manager ordered the guards to dismantle the dais. The guards jumped into action, tore down our party flags and thrashed us out of the tea estate. We could not afford a resistance as we were too small in number and were totally unprepared for such faceoff,' Sanyal recalled.

~

The CPI could not make it big in the 1952 West Bengal Assembly election; Congress thumped to power by winning a majority 150 of the 238 Assembly seats.

However, the United Socialist Organisation (USO) Communist Alliance headed by the CPI emerged as the largest non-Congress alliance in the West Bengal Assembly. The CPI won 28 seats, its coalition partners Forward Bloc wrested 12 and the Socialist Republican Party bagged one seat.

Moreover, the electioneering on a range of issues concerning the common man facilitated the Communists a support base among the peasantry and the poor. Sanyal's dedication and hard work during the poll campaign came as a testimony to his organising capabilities.

Keeping this in mind, soon after the election, the CPI appointed him as secretary of the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha*, that is, the party's peasant wing. Party higher-ups specifically asked him to concentrate on the farmers of the Terai region of Darjeeling and build up a peasant movement.

With this new responsibility bestowed on him, Sanyal shifted his base to Patharghata village near Matigara. Along with comrade Keshav Sarkar, who was already working in the area, he found accommodation in the house of *Adivasi* farmer Bandhan Oran, who had unsuccessfully contested the 1952 Assembly poll on a CPI ticket.

The same time round, changes were also taking place in the life of Sanyal's mentor Charu Mazumdar. After the 1952 Assembly poll, Mazumdar married Lila Roy—a fellow activist in the CPI and permanently relocated his base from Jalpaiguri to Siliguri. They started living in Mazumdar's ancestral house at Mahananda Para in Siliguri, even though Mazumdar continued to be a member of the CPI Jalpaiguri district committee.

It was only in 1954, when Mazumdar's party membership was transferred to Siliguri and he became an executive member of the CPI Darjeeling district committee.

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With the dream of a peasant movement in their eyes, Sanyal and Keshav Sarkar started roving across the villages and tea gardens in

Terai. They held numerous small group meetings with party sympathisers and common farmers to sensitise them against the perpetual exploitations by the landlord class.

'Assembling the farmers and wage earners for a political meeting was not an easy task. This is because, they undertake rigorous physical labour throughout the day and by evening, they are hardly left with any energy to listen to political discourse,' Sanyal pointed out.

But Sanyal soon found a way out. *Haat* or the weekly market day used to be an occasion when all villagers converged at a common venue to sell their produce and buy provisions. Seizing this opportunity, Sanyal began holding the *Krishak Sabha* meetings at the *haat*s itself.

This proved an instant hit; villagers and farmers attending the *haat*s would listen to Sanyal and his comrades' political discourse while they purchased provisions or sold their produce. On several occasions, the open-air gatherings would stretch beyond the *haat* timings, yet a sizeable number of audience stayed back to listen to the CPI leaders.

'One important feature of the *haat* meetings was the interactions that used to commence spontaneously after the speeches. On several occasions, farmers and workers would throw up queries on what had just been spoken about and seek clarifications. Such open-ended interactions between the orators and the audience were extremely lively and mutually enriching,' Sanyal would recall.

~

Time was flowing like the turbulent waters of mountain brooks found in plenty in eastern Himalaya. Sanyal and Keshav were whirling through the villages, holding *haat* meetings one after another.

The response from farmers was promising, yet Sanyal was far from being content. He was desperately looking for a few dedicated activists from amongst the local farmers and wage earners, who could play harbingers to the peasant awakening that the CPI was calling for. But till then, such individuals were elusive, making Sanyal impatient by the day.

Amidst this, they convened a *haat* meeting at Naxalbari. The open-air meeting commenced late in the afternoon and stretched long into the evening. Electricity being off limits for the rural pocket, a few kerosene

lamps were lit up to illuminate the venue. Sanyal spoke at length on the farmers' role to uproot landlordism from the country.

'After the prolonged meeting, when Keshav and I were preparing to return to our base that a young man came forward from amongst the dispersing crowd. As he came closer, even in the dim illumination of the kerosene lamps, I could figure out his strong masculine physic and oily skin. His eyes were blazing like that of a tiger's in the wild.'

'He introduced himself in Hindi pronounced with a predominant tint of Santali language and expressed eagerness to join the *Krishak Sabha*,' Sanyal recalled delightedly.

After a brief interaction, the young man invited Sanyal and Keshav to his residence and a date was mutually agreed upon for the proposed visit. This young man was none other than Jangal Santhal, who later became Sanyal's closest lieutenant.

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Jangal used to live at Fakirajote village under Hatighisha gram panchayat area in Naxalbari. On the scheduled day, Sanyal and Keshav turned up at his residence in the evening.

'Jangal originally hailed from the eastern part of Nepal, bordering Naxalbari. The region is also referred to as the Nepal Terai. He had escaped onto the Indian side of the border following a ruckus with the Royal Police of Nepal.'

'In his mid-twenties, he was already married while in Nepal. On coming to India, he found livelihood as a sharecropper and married for the second time. Thus, at Fakirajote, he lived with his two wives,' Sanyal said.

Jangal and his wives accorded the Communist guests a warm hospitality. They were offered *Nun-cha,* salted tea. *Nun-cha* is a common beverage drank in the *Adivasi* tribal families. Most *Adivasi*s drink tea with salt due to their poor economic condition; affording sugar and milk is a far-fetched dream for them.

Sipping *Nun-cha*, Sanyal and Keshav started grilling Jangal about his intention and sincerity to join the *Krishak Sabha*. But it was not long before, they were convinced that Jangal had the fire in him and was determined to fight for the cause of the peasantry. He was soon inducted into the *Krishak Sabha*.

According to Sanyal, in the run up to the Naxalbari uprising, Jangal Santhal was his best discovery ever.

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A few months later, in July–August of 1952, the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha* convened a two-day long peasants' conference at Ghoshpukhur village under Phansidewa development block.

Needless to mention, Sanyal was the driving force behind the conference. He was also looking after the arrangements personally.

The conference venue was an open field. A huge tent was erected making up for the conference hall-cum-dormitory where the delegates could sleep at night. With the monsoon on its way out, the organisers were not anticipating a major downpour; hence preparations were made only to withstand a drizzle at best.

A makeshift kitchen was also set up by the conference hall-cum-dormitory to cook meals for the participants. Only one earthen-range was dug up and the idea was to cook *khichudi*, a hotchpotch of rice and pulses, and serve it as a common meal.

To the amazement of Sanyal and his fellow comrades, some 600-odd marginal farmers and sharecroppers turned up for the conference. They belonged to various castes and sub-castes of the *Adivasi* tribal and other general communities.

The conference began at the scheduled time and was hardly two hours old when a sudden pandemonium broke out at the venue!

Some of the delegate farmers came to know that a common meal was being cooked for everyone in the same earthen-range. They in turn sounded an alarm among their fellow caste members.

Delegates from the different castes and sub-castes of the *Adivasi*s rejected the idea of sharing the meal cooked in the same oven, saying that this would dislodge them from their respective castes. The subsequent chaos overcast the conference.

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'To my utter disbelief, many of our active *Krishak Sabha* activists were among the dissenters. I earnestly tried to persuade the *Adivasi* delegates, but they remained adamant on not sharing the common meal.'

'With no other way out, we finally conceded to digging up separate earthen-ranges, dedicating one each for the participating castes or sub-castes,' Sanyal pointed out.

But while giving in to the caste-constrains, Sanyal pledged in silence to eradicate this malady from amongst the farmers—at least from the minds of those associated with the *Krishak Sabha*.

He could comprehend that such petty caste or religious discriminations were the main constraints in the unity of the peasants and the working class. 'If the working class cannot overcome such fallacies, how will they fight down the perpetual exploitation by the landlords?'

With the dispute over the meal getting resolved, the conference resumed. But as if the pandemonium over the meal was not enough, a heavy shower soon lashed over the venue catching everyone unwary.

The Nor'wester did not take long to submerge the conference venue in knee-deep water.

The *Adivasi* farmers, who were bickering for separate meals a while ago, were now clasping onto each other under the sopping tent. The scene at the kitchen was hardly any better; volunteers managed to save raw grains but the earthen-ranges and the firewood were completely submerged.

The rains ceded late in the afternoon, allowing the conference and the cooking to resume simultaneously.

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At the end of day two, the conference proved to be a successful one. Sanyal was especially encouraged by the farmers' active participation in the open discussion—putting forward suggestions to strengthen the organisation and the peasant struggle in general.

After a threadbare debate and deliberations, the conference concluded by adopting three main resolutions:

First, stop paying the 'grain-tax' to landlords. Second, the abrogation of illegal extortion by landlords and third, rationalising the exorbitant interest that landlords impose on farmers for agricultural borrowings.

All the three demands were linked to the exploitation that the landlords had been carrying out on the farmers for ages. For example, in

addition to taking away 50 per cent of the harvest, the landlords also used to levy a 'tax' on the share of the *adihar*s, the sharecroppers.

There also used to be frequent additional recovery from the *adihar*s on various pretexts such as the marriage of landlords' daughter or son, fuel cost of the vehicles that the landlords plied, maintenance of the warehouse and so on.

'Thus, at the end of a harvest season, nothing will be left for the *adihar*s; only a few lucky ones were able to take home barely a quintal of paddy,' Sanyal explained, adding a perspective to the charter of demands.

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Now the only agenda before Sanyal was to nurture the peasants' enthusiasm to a level, when they could take the tyrannical landlords head-on. That was easy said than done. It required dedicated involvement.

Sanyal realised, being an outsider, he could hardly rouse the farmers for that ultimate struggle. To motivate the peasants, he will have to become one of them.

Consequent to this, late in 1952, Sanyal permanently shifted his base to Naxalbari—the heartland of *Adivasi* tea workers and farmers in the Terai. From here on, it was a new episode altogether, unfolding gradually like an epic saga.

CHAPTER NINE

Sanyal and his comrades began the year 1953 with an extensive campaign on the *Krishak Sabha*'s three-point resolution that was adopted at the Phansidewa conference.

They roved across Terai, sensitising the farmers in each and every village and urged them to get united for the cause. Though Sanyal was now based at Naxalbari, many a time, in the course of the campaign, he would spend the night at other villages, in the hutments of poor peasants.

'This benefited me to a large extent; the *Adivasi* farmers started counting me as one of them. In whichever household I spent the night after party meetings, without the slightest hesitation, they offered me the same food they ate and the tattered bed on which they slept.'

'This further exposed me to the perpetual poverty that the *Adivasi* peasants used to live in. It strengthened my conviction to fight for a radical change in their socio-economic status,' Sanyal explained.

But the more he was getting close to the marginalised farmers, the ties with his family in Siliguri were loosening. In the initial months after he had become a CPI whole-timer, Sanyal used to visit his parents

at least once in a week; now, the frequency of such trips was getting delayed by even three to four months. It now almost became common that Sanyal would embark on a quarterly visit to Siliguri, but not before mother *Nirmala* had sent in an urgent communiqué.

'Actually, the political activities had increased so much that even sparing a single day solely for my individual purpose had become very difficult. So what I used to do was to schedule my family visit coinciding with that of a party meeting or some other political commitments in Siliguri,' Sanyal would recall.

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Late in 1953, the *Krishak Sabha* convened its West Bengal state conference at Malda. The conference was organised at Naugharia village, the native place of Malda district secretary, Manik Jha.

Sanyal went to the state conference with a four-member delegation representing the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha*. It was the first-ever occasion that Sanyal was attending a state conference and naturally, he was very excited. He was keen to listen to the deliberations of senior CPI leaders from across Bengal and other parts of the country.

The main agenda of the state conference was to discuss the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Bill, 1953. The Congress government had just introduced the Bill in the state Assembly with the apparent aim to abolish *Zamindari* or landlordism.

Krishak Sabha's publicised stand was to seek amendments to the proposed Bill and deliberations were on to finalise those aspects.

Bankim Mukherjee, a stalwart Communist ideologue, was then the vice-president of the *All India Kishan Sabha*. He had the rare credit of founding trade unions in Bombay, *Kishan Sabha* movement in Uttar Pradesh and had been also closely associated with the peasant struggle in pre-Independent East Bengal. Mukherjee was present at the Malda state conference as a distinguished speaker.

Taking part in the deliberations, he opposed the West Bengal *Krishak Sabha*'s decision to seek amendments to the Estate Acquisition Bill. Irrespective of the number of amendments, the Bill would not be able to abolish landlordism completely, he opined.

Instead, Mukherjee proposed that the *Krishak Sabha* draft a new Bill altogether with the aim of effecting a radical land reform in

West Bengal. But his suggestion was outrightly rejected at the behest of *Krishak Sabha*'s leading lobby.

'The rejection of Bankim Mukherjee's proposal surprised me. Drafting a fresh Bill would have given us enormous scope to incorporate all our agendas. Even if it was not passed in the state Assembly, the Bill would have been a testimony to our endeavours for a radical land reform in conformity with the Communist ideology.'

'Lenin's *Agrarian Question* had provided me some insight on bourgeois reforms and I could appreciate that the duty of a Communist was to always oppose such cosmetic moves. But for some mysterious reasons, the state conference walked along the other way,' Sanyal would point out.

Returning to Siliguri, he raised the issue with mentor Charu Mazumdar, but the senior comrade evaded giving a straight answer. '*You certainly have a point, but I will reserve my opinion for now*,' Mazumdar told Sanyal.

~

Krishak Sabha's extensive campaign continued throughout 1953 across the length and breadth of Terai and the efforts began to yield results by early 1954 itself. Marginal farmers and sharecroppers across the region now started demanding a proper distribution of paddy harvest—the common cash crop grown in Terai.

Chaitu Singh and Chilai Singh of Sebdella Jote in Naxalbari were sharecroppers on the farmland of Khola Singh Tharu—a dreaded landlord in the area. Tharu's influence could well be judged from the fact that he was the head of a coterie of 17 landlords hailing from in and around Naxalbari.

In January 1954, Chaitu Singh and Chilai Singh called on Sanyal and urged him to convince their landlord for a proper distribution of the paddy harvest. Consequent to this, a few days later, accompanied by Chaitu and Chilai, Sanyal turned up at Tharu's warehouse at Sebdella Jote.

The all-imposing landlord was inside his warehouse. It was a customary norm not to enter a harvest stockroom with ones shoes on and Sanyal was well aware of this. But in order to take a psychological advantage, Sanyal did not remove his shoes and forayed right into the warehouse holding a baton in his hand.

At this, landlord Tharu got furious and angrily asked Sanyal to put off his shoes at once. Instead of cowering down, Sanyal shouted back at the landlord at a more amplifying pitch and this left Tharu completely shell-shocked.

The landlord toned down the very next moment, but outright rejected the two-thirds harvest sharing formula in favour of the *adihars*—a demand the *Krishak Sabha* had been striving for.

Ignoring Tharu's objection, Sanyal turned to Chaitu and Chilai and asked them to distribute the harvest according to the *Krishak Sabha* formula. Perhaps owing to their innate loyalty towards the landlord gentry, the *adihar*s were a little hesitant. They stood idle.

But when Sanyal iterated the instruction with a heightened thrust this time, the sharecroppers plunged into action instantly.

~

The news spread overnight like a wildfire. It was indeed a momentous occasion that a dreaded landlord such as Tharu had to accept the *Krishak Sabha*'s harvest sharing formula.

Farmers across the Terai started rejoicing the achievement and similar demands for harvest sharing began to crop up from everywhere. This facilitated the *Krishak Sabha* movement a major push; more and more farmers were now joining the organisation in spontaneity.

Hit hard on their vested interest, the landlords too were getting united to counter the *Krishak Sabha*. This set the stage for a face-off between the two classes of the rural cluster: the haves and the have-nots.

A few days later, on a February morning, another *adihar* Shobha Biswakarmakar came rushing to Sanyal from Birsingh Jote village. The *adihar*'s landlord Serket Singh had refused to part with the farmer's share of the harvest.

He also informed that Serket Singh was assembling other landlords at his warehouse and has warned the farmers against making any advances.

'It was the day of *Saraswati Puja*. I was to attend an invitation at a local teacher's household. Fellow comrade Jogen Mukherjee insisted, we first attend the invitation and then visit Birsingh Jote village for

a talk with the landlord. But I turned down the idea; the priority was to settle the score with the errant landlord first,' Sanyal recalled.

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Like most landlords in Terai, Serket Singh had two wives; they lived in separate houses in the same Birsingh Jote village. Serket's warehouse was located on the first floor of a wooden building, where lived his second wife.

Accompanied by comrade Jogen Mukherjee and a handful of farmer activists, Sanyal arrived at the house. To resist their entry, the landlord had locked up the main gate from inside. But a resolute Sanyal forced his way right into the warehouse without having the slightest apprehension about what was waiting for them.

'The moment we stepped in, a group of landlord-ladies, all equipped with batons, jumped over us and unleashed an indiscriminate attack. Before we could recover from the initial jolt, the landlords and their armed guards emerged from behind and carried out a second bout of assault,' Sanyal said narrating the event.

Jogen Mukherjee sustained grave injuries in the attack. His head was profusely bleeding. Sanyal and others were also inflicted with injuries and this compelled the team to make a retreat.

Enraged at the turn of events, Sanyal sent out an SOS message to his comrades all across. He asked all farmer activists to gather at Birsingh Jote village at the earliest possible. The message spread like a magnetic wave; by noon, over 400 farmers gathered at the village. Many more were still pouring in from various far-flung areas.

Sanyal's trusted comrade, Jangal Santhal, also rushed in. He took lead of the agitated farmers. Armed with batons, bows and arrows, etc., they were now growing impatient to take revenge on the landlords.

In spontaneity, the agitated gathering decided to torch all the landlord households in the locality. Sanyal refrained them saying that it would cause damage to the houses of neighbourhood farmers as well.

Instead, Sanyal asked them to pick the landlords one by one from their residence and subject them to rigorous physical punishment.

Over the next five to six hours, Sanyal and his farmer-comrades invaded the landlord households one after another, beating and

whipping the landlords mercilessly. By evening, the gathering of farmers swelled to around 1,000. The jubilant crowd took out a victory procession.

'I did not expect the large number of farmers to assemble over such a short notice. The fact was that the *Krishak Sabha* campaign throughout 1953 had succeeded in sensitising the peasantry beyond our expectations. The hard work was now yielding results,' Sanyal explained.

The injured landlords, on the other hand, were too terrified to even venture out of their homes for treatment. They sent a messenger to Naxalbari police station with a written complaint against the agitating farmers. Describing the situation they were in, the landlords urged the police to rescue them immediately.

In those days, Naxalbari police station was very small in strength, barely having five or six policemen including that of the officer-in-charge. With this handful of personnel, it was unlikely for the police to rush to the landlords' rescue.

But Sanyal could pre-empt that the police might send a message asking the agitators to represent themselves at Naxalbari police station and respond to the complaint lodged by the landlords. And whosoever was sent to the police station, the cops would arrest him instantly.

Thus as a countermove, Sanyal decided lodging an FIR against the landlords, but not at the Naxalbari police station. Instead, drafting a complaint against some 17-odd landlords, he sent Jangal Santhal to the Bagdogra police outpost. The outpost was located about 8 km away from Birsingh Jote village.

Getting the FIR registered at Bagdogra outpost, Jangal returned to the village late in the night.

'Lodging the counter-complaint at Bagdogra was a real intelligent move, I realised later. None had advised me to do so but somehow my intuition guided me in the act. It later proved very useful,' Sanyal would point out.

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The remaining few hours of the night passed in excitement and apprehension. Next morning, the Naxalbari police marched into Birsingh Jote village with a reasonably large police contingent requisitioned

from Siliguri. The aim is to arrest the farmers involved in the landlord bashing the previous afternoon.

Pre-empting such a police raid, Sanyal had asked his farmer activists to gather at the village by 8 in the morning. The instruction was followed religiously.

Police took position on the right bank of tiny Manjha River that flows across the length of Birsingh Jote vertically dividing the hamlet into two parts. To take on them, some 1,500-odd farmers positioned themselves on the left bank of Manjha. Armed with bows and arrows, lathis, etc., the peasants were ready for a face-off with the police team that had 50–55 personnel at best.

'Shambhu *Babu*, the officer-in-charge of Siliguri police station, was at the lead. We knew each other when I was briefly employed at the Siliguri SDO office. Standing opposite to me on Manjha riverbank, he shouted out my name and requested me to go to the other side of the river for a discussion,' Sanyal continued.

Sanyal readily accepted the idea of holding a discussion, but insisted that the police officer come to the farmers' side of the river. Having been assured a safe passage, Shambhu *Babu* crossed the knee-deep river holding his shoes in hand and lifting the trouser to his knees to save it from getting wet.

Sitting face to face with Sanyal, the officer told about the FIR that the landlords have lodged against the agitators. He maintained that the police have no other option but to arrest some of the accused farmers.

Sanyal acknowledged the logic but reminded the police officer that they too have lodged a complaint against the landlords at Bagdogra police outpost. Going by the same logic, the accused landlords must also face arrest.

'I told Shambhu *Babu* point-blank, if you want a confrontation, we are ready for that. But if you want to handle the situation amicably, then the police would have to arrest the landlords first and parade them before the farmers as a proof. The arrested landlords would have to be tied at their waists in a single rope, I told him categorically. Once that is done, the police can arrest as many farmers they wish; there will be no resistance from our end,' Sanyal said.

With no other way out, the police officer conceded to the plan. He took leave to arrest the accused landlords. Sanyal had conceived

the 'arrest for arrest' formula with the aim to irrevocably damage the landlords' image before the peasantry.

'I had read in Mao Tse-tung's *Hunan Report*: if the landlord class is insulted or humiliated in front of the peasantry, this would work as a stimulus to the peasant struggle. Birsingh Jote episode was my first opportunity to put this theory to practice,' he recalled.

The experiment yielded a tremendous result; an hour later, the moment police brought the landlords on Manjha riverbank with their waists tied up in a long rope, the farmers rose in applause and joy.

It was a rare scene for them to witness 'the all omnipotent' landlords, who have exploited and abused the peasants since time immemorial, stand like petty criminals. Now when the turn came for the farmers to court arrest, the excitement was such that everyone was keen to give in to the police.

'There was a standing instruction from Charu *Da* that in the event of a face-off with police, being a leading comrade, I must evade arrest. The logic was that the leader getting arrested would leave the movement headless; this would harm the long-term goal.'

'But that day, I chose to defy Charu *Da*'s instruction. I realised that my evading an arrest would demoralise the farmers; this might also create a negative impression about the *Krishak Sabha* leadership,' Sanyal had reasoned.

Starting with Sanyal, police officer Shambhu *Babu* began listing the names of farmers who had voluntarily courted arrest. But after listing barely 82-odd farmers, he got exhausted and called it enough.

Sanyal and his farmer accomplices and the landlords were then put into two police vans heading to Siliguri. On the way, the *Krishak Sabha* group shouted slogans in favour of the peasant movement drawing attention from the passers-by.

The police produced the two arrested groups before the Siliguri court the same day. Hearing into the case, the designated court remanded both the farmers and the landlords to judicial custody at the same Siliguri Sub-Jail.

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Sanyal was not new to Siliguri Jail. He had spent several months in this jail before and owing to this, he was well known to the jail wardens

and the guards. Taking advantage of this, he decided to 'teach' the landlords some lessons inside the jail.

By manipulating the jail staff, Sanyal arranged lodging for the landlords in a cell close to the lavatory. He also issued a whip—the landlords would have to fetch drinking water from the prison well for all the jail inmates. The landlords could not help but obey the order silently.

But that was not all; Sanyal made another significant achievement at the Siliguri Jail, one that he had been aspiring for quite some time.

During the 1952 *Krishak Sabha* conference at Ghoshpukhur, the *Adivasi* peasants had refused to share the meal cooked in the same oven. Sharing a common meal would dislodge them from their respective castes, the peasants had argued.

Failing to convince the farmers then, Sanyal had pledged to eradicate the deep-rooted caste discrimination from the *Adivasi* psyche in future. The jail term facilitated him a just opportunity.

'Inside the jail, the farmers had no other choice but to eat the same meal prepared in a common kitchen. Moreover, I often ensured that the farmer of one caste brought food for another and they also drank water fetched by the landlords who belonged to other communities. Thus when they came out of the jail later, caste considerations became a non-issue for the *Adivasi* comrades,' Sanyal would point out.

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After spending one and a half months behind the bars, Sanyal and his farmer comrades were released on bail. This induced a renewed vigour in fellow activists and the peasant movement got a shot in the arm.

On being released from jail, Sanyal made a tactical move. He urged the Siliguri SDO, Mr P.K. Barua, to hold all future hearings into the case at Merry View Tea Estate near Naxalbari and not at the usual venue of the Siliguri court. The logic being that poor farmers can hardly afford the eight *anna* travelling expense needed to reach Siliguri. Thankfully, the SDO conceded holding the hearings at Merry View.

'The relaxation was more because of Mr Barua's inclination to visit new places and relish good food than his compassion for the poor peasants,' Sanyal recalled.

The development proved yet another boon for the Communist organisation. Every time a hearing was held at Merry View Tea Estate, the accused farmers would march together shouting slogans calling for the unity of the working class. Such gestures and proceedings of the hearing used to leave a positive influence on the workers of Merry View.

As a result, soon a CPI-affiliated workers' union came up there; it was the third Communist tea trade union in Terai after the ones at Fulbari and Thanjhora tea estate.

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Krishak Sabha's activities were expanding by the day. The peasants' body was now getting calls from sharecroppers all across to settle score with tyrannical landlords and the requests were being addressed successfully.

At Burraganj village in Naxalbari, Sanyal and his comrades re-established sharecropper Leus and Gopal Oran's control over the farmland that was forcibly occupied by landlord Harihar Singh on the pretext of 'tax' overdue.

Krishak Sabha activists were undertaking similar drives almost everywhere, yet Sanyal continued to receive more and more requests from the marginalised peasants asking for his personal intervention.

One day in the monsoon of 1954, two farmers, Chengai Singh and Dhut Mech came rushing for help. Thirani Estate—a *Zamindar* firm based in neighbouring Bihar—had forcibly taken possession of their farmland measuring about 60 *bigha* (1,200 cottah) citing agricultural debt.

The *Zamindar* had begun tilling the land by employing wage labourers; Chengai and Dhut wanted the *Krishak Sabha* to restore their ownership on the land. But Sanyal advised otherwise.

Pointing out that laying an immediate siege to the farmland will scuttle the cultivation for the season, he advised the farmers to keep low for the time being. Sanyal assured, by the time the paddy was ready for harvesting, *Krishak Sabha* activists would reap the entire harvest and Thirani Estate would bite the dust.

Consequent to the assurance, in January 1955, hundreds of *Krishak Sabha* activists converged at the farmland of Chengai Singh and Dhut

Mech. In the course of a single day, they harvested the entire crop spread over the sprawling 60-*bigha* plot.

As is obvious, Thirani Estate was not ready to give up easily; they hired 100-odd Bihari workers from Siliguri. The plan was to intercept the *Krishak Sabha* activists on their way back.

'Armed with spears, batons, etc., the Bihari workers waited near Bataria riverbank located opposite to the farmland. As a counter-move, our *Adivasi* comrades took positions with bows and arrows. Seeing the large contingent wielding bows and arrows, the hired Bihari force made a retreat even before an actual face-off,' Sanyal recalled.

The incident added yet another feather to *Krishak Sabha*'s glory; it was now an all-omnipotent entity in the Terai. Significantly, the rich farmers too started joining the peasant struggle, extending financial and manpower support to the *Krishak Sabha*.

'Truly speaking, the series of actions throughout 1954–55 had laid the actual foundation for the landmark Naxalbari uprising of 1967. It was in those two years that we discovered many of our best farmer comrades and they remained loyal and dedicated to the cause until death,' Sanyal would tell.

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The success of *Krishak Sabha* movement was drawing more and more comrade volunteers by every passing day. While majority of them were fresh recruits, there were some old guards as well who until then were active in other fronts of the Communist Party.

Muzibur Rehman was one such activist who had become a party member in 1946—four years before Sanyal joined the CPI. He had served jail terms for being involved with the Communist Party. Rehman approached Sanyal expressing eagerness to become a *Krishak Sabha* whole-timer at Naxalbari and was readily accommodated.

In mid-1955, the West Bengal government began the process of updating the land records in Terai. Around the same time, Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy gave a call for the unification of Bengal and Bihar—an idea the CPI opposed vehemently. To foil the unification move, the Communist Party had convened a state-wide *Satyagrah* demonstration.

'On the day of the *Satyagrah*, I was addressing a gathering at Naxalbari that farmer Chengai Singh came rushing. He conveyed a message, which to me was no less than dropping a bombshell.'

'The farmer alleged that in a bid to gobble up his farmland, our senior comrade Muzibur Rehman has submitted a false application to the land-record officer,' Sanyal recalled.

Initially, Sanyal did not believe the allegation and even warned Chengai Singh against falsehood. But when the farmer remained firm on his allegation, Sanyal called on the land-record officer to verify the charge. To his utter shock, he found the allegation to be true.

'In connivance with Thirani Estate, comrade Rehman had procured a false land-revenue receipt issued in his name. He submitted the same to the land-record officer for updating the records,' Sanyal narrated.

Countering the fake claim, Sanyal presented the land-record officer certified copies of a court verdict that establishes Chengai Singh's ownership on the plot.

'This is how I foiled Rehman's ill motives, but the episode left me shell-shocked. How could a Communist indulge in treachery? I asked myself. I reported the matter to the party district committee and following an internal probe, Rehman was expelled from the party. Since then, he had no connection, whatsoever, with the Communist Movement at Naxalbari or elsewhere.'

'But ironically, during the 1967 Naxalbari Movement, in a hyperactive pursuit to catch Naxalites, the police arrested this very Muzibur Rehman. From that day, he started posing as a Naxalite leader,' Sanyal pointed out in a cynical tone.

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In 1955, the Congress-led state government enacted a new law called the West Bengal Land Reforms Act. The Act was drafted with the purported purpose of giving farmers ownership of the land that they tilled.

But in reality, the Act was a clever attempt to tactfully bypass the Communist Party's call for *land to the tillers* and curb the ever-intensifying peasant movement by adopting a middle path.

'Actually, on the face of our popular agitation, the Congress government was finding itself in a tight spot. That was mainly due

to the socialist façade that the Congress used to maintain and this resulted in the birth of West Bengal Land Reforms Act that could at best facilitate a sham-land reform. The ploy was to calm down the agitating farmers, but without annoying the feudal landlords, the main financers of the Congress party,' Sanyal explained.

The Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha* was in no mood for a compromise. It was hell bent on establishing the sharecroppers' absolute right over the land they tilled and also the harvest.

To realise the goal, Sanyal started expanding his area of operation beyond Naxalbari. He became the most sought-after CPI leader be it at Phansidewa, Khoribari, Matigara—everywhere in Siliguri subdivision.

Every new dawn brought along restlessness and ended with more and more success stories of establishing the peasants' rights. The activities would invite their share of litigations from the landlords. Tackling the legal hassles, attending to court hearings, etc. soon became an integral part of the *Krishak Sabha* movement.

Simultaneously, Sanyal and his comrades would take out time to form trade unions in the tea plantations across Terai. 'For this, party sympathiser Dr K.N. Chatterjee had donated three bi-cycles to the CPI Siliguri subdivisional committee. Charu *Da* and two other comrades—Biren Bose and Atin Bose used to visit the tea gardens on those bicycles. But it was more of a joyride for them than anything else,' Sanyal would recall.

Those days were challenging; on most occasions, the tea garden managements used to oppose the formation of trade union in their plantations. In fact, at one of the plantations, that is the Satbhaiya division of Atal tea estate, the manager and armed guards literally thrashed out the CPI activists. Yet ultimately they could not stop the formation of a Communist trade union there.

This being the situation in Terai, CPI activists in the adjoining Darjeeling hills and Dooars were also enmeshed in similar actions.

In Darjeeling hills, senior party leader Bhadra Bahadur Hamal was roving from one tea plantation to another forming the Communist trade union brick by brick. Ratanlal Brahammin, who had served jail terms in 1948–51 during the government ban on Communist Party, was the CPI district secretary then.

'Brahammin *Daju*, however, was concentrating more on strengthening the party organisation in other spheres and was comparatively less active on the trade union front,' Sanyal pointed out.

Apart from the CPI-affiliated novice union, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) had some presence in the sphere of tea trade union in Darjeeling hills. AIGL in those days used to be a reckoning political force in the hills.

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Plantation owners in the Terai those days often used to employ a divide and rule policy to scuttle an agitation by their workers.

Whenever workers of any tea plantation took to demonstration or went on a cease work over demands, the management used to hire farmers from nearby villages and engage them in tea plucking or in other jobs at the factory.

Thus even if the regular workers were on strike, production of tea would continue almost unhindered. Eventually, this used to compel the agitating tea workers to bow down before the management without any of their grievances being addressed, however legitimate those might have been. Hence, it soon came up as a real challenge for the *Krishak Sabha* to unite the peasantry and the tea workers.

To achieve this goal, *Krishak Sabha* coined a new slogan—*Shoshaner Biruddhe Sramik-Krishaker Ekkaya,* unity of the workers and the peasantry against exploitation.

On one hand, they started making the farmers realise that they must stop being used as a tool to spoil the tea workers' agitation and on the other they convinced the tea workers that to gain support of the farmers they would have to stand by the peasantry in its fight against landlordism.

This did a miracle! After being subjected to mindless exploitation for ages, the farmers and the workers now got united. They were ready to fight back.

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In mid-1955, on the pretext of an industrial slump, tea estate owners in the Darjeeling hills, Dooars and Terai announced that henceforth they would pay wage to workers only for four days a week.

Opposing the move, tea workers in all across the three regions went on an indefinite general strike on 22 June. There was also the demand for bonus. That was the first-ever general strike in the history of tea industry in West Bengal.

The strike was jointly convened by the *Darjeeling Zilla Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union,* the *Dooars Cha Mazdoor Union*—both affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) of the CPI; the trade union of AIGL, and a few other trade unions affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of the Congress party.

'Initially, INTUC was not in favour of the general strike but had to give in on the face of a growing clout of the Communist trade unions. But even as the INTUC fell in line, several Congress leaders remained hand-in-glove with the plantation managements and made several futile attempts to sabotage the agitation,' Sanyal recalled.

It was decided that during the general strike, AITUC and INTUC would take out joint protest rallies in the Terai every day.

In the AITUC camp, Keshav Sarkar was given the charge of organising rallies along National Highway 31 that leads to Calcutta. Jogen Mukherjee and Panchanan Sarkar were responsible for rallies along the road to Khoribari. And lastly, Sanyal was given the charge to hold rallies along the road stretch between Bagdogra and Naxalbari.

The protest rallies, comprising both tea workers and farmers, used to start early in the morning and stretch until dusk. Participants of these rallies used to be equipped with bows and arrows and other traditional weapons.

'The rally comprising both men and women would look more like a celebration than a protest march. Since the rally used to last throughout the day, there were arrangements for mobile tea and tobacco shops. Also there were music players for entertainment,' Sanyal would point out.

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On day four of the strike, that is, on 25 June 1955, there occurred an untoward incident. At the Margaret's Hope Tea Estate near Sonada in Darjeeling hills, police opened fire on the agitating tea workers. Six tea workers were killed on the spot.

They were Kale Limbu, Hitman Tamang, Kanchansundar Rai, Nandalal Biswakarma, Amritmaya Raini and Moulisewa Raini.

The incident triggered a spontaneous outburst, which soon spread across the nook and corner of the hills like a wildfire. Next day, thousands of agitated tea workers and villagers from across the hills marched into Darjeeling town—the seat of the district administration. They literally laid a siege to the district headquarters.

'*It was an unprecedented gathering and the administration almost had a nervous breakdown. There was no way they could tame the swelling mob*,' fellow comrades had told Sanyal later.

'The agitation could have easily transpired into a historic event, but the party's district secretary, comrade Ratanlal Brahammin, asked the crowd to retreat,' Sanyal would recall with a sense of disgruntlement.

Meanwhile, the moment the news of the Margaret's Hope police firing reached Terai, a pall of gloom descended over the tea workers here. As if that was not enough, on day six of the strike, Sanyal and his associates got another disappointing news.

They came to know that workers at the Merry View Tea Estate near Naxalbari have decided to withdraw from the strike. They were going to resume work from the next day. If that happens, workers of other tea estates too will give in one after another and the entire agitation will get spoiled, Sanyal realised.

To scuttle the move, he set out for Merry View Tea Estate early next morning, leading a rally of over 5,000 agitators. Like other days, the participants were equipped with traditional weapons and Sanyal asked them to stay prepared for a possible face-off with police.

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As was the apprehension, a large contingent of police intercepted the rally at the entrance of Merry View Tea Estate. Armed with firearms, the police asked the agitators to retract.

'Incidentally, the sub-inspector who was leading the police contingent came out to be my classmate from Kurseong School. I categorically told him that the police could stop us only by opening a fire, but if they did so, the arrows and spears that were there at the hands of our nearly 5,000 activists would surely speak up in retaliation.'

'But there is another way out,' Sanyal told his classmate cop, 'That is, to allow us march into the tea plantation and I promise our activists will do no harm to anyone.'

On giving it a studied thought, the police officer conceded; the rally was allowed to march ahead. As soon as the rally stepped inside the Merry View compound, the workers who had defied the strike fled out of fear and the tea estate again returned to the strike.

Realising the goal without a commotion, the rally led by Sanyal moved out in a joyous mood. A real surprise, however, was awaiting Sanyal!

'We had just stepped on the main road to Naxalbari that a policeman came rushing to me and handed over a letter claiming that it was sent by Charu Mazumdar. Initially, I became a little suspicious because of the simple reason that why on earth Charu *Da* would send me a communiqué through a policeman?'

'But on opening the hand-scribbled letter, I recognised, it was indeed penned by Charu *Da*. He has asked me to see him at once at the Bagdogra police investigation centre. There was an assurance in the letter that police would not arrest me under any circumstances.'

'I was really at my wits end; first, Charu *Da* sends me a communiqué at the hands of a cop and then asks me to meet him at a police station! After consulting some of my close comrades, I left for Bagdogra. I instructed the rally to march ahead towards Naxalbari,' Sanyal explained.

The puzzle was yet to unravel.

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On reaching the Bagdogra police post, Sanyal found Charu Mazumdar seated in the chamber of the officer-in-charge. Mazumdar offered him a seat, but Sanyal neither had the desire nor patience to relish amidst the cops.

'*I will prefer to stand*,' he responded in a stiff voice. 'Finding me adamant, Charu *Da* did not pester and instead began to speak. He asked me why the tea workers under my control were carrying weapons during the rallies. He also sought to know why we had marched into Merry View Tea Estate,' Sanyal recalled.

The queries only added to Sanyal's astonishment, but he was not inclined to discuss such organisational issues in front of the police. '*I am not interested in discussing these issues here in the police station. Besides, why shouldn't the workers carry their traditional weapons and what was wrong if we rallied into Merry View, which was conspiring to derail our strike?*' Sanyal responded rudely.

But the reply of Charu Mazumdar was even beyond his wildest imagination. 'Charu *Da* revealed that he had been into a verbal understanding with the INTUC that tea gardens owned by Congress leaders would be kept out of the purview of the strike. In return, they would automatically grant a bonus to the workers, provided other planters too had accepted the bonus-demand after the general strike.'

'*This is absurd*,' I told Charu *Da*, '*Every planter could have offered us a similar formula and hence, there would have been no need to convene the strike at all. Besides, how could you enter into such an agreement keeping all of us in the dark?*'

'Charu *Da* had no explanation, but he continued to refer to the verbal agreement and asked me not to march into Deomoni Tea Estate, which was our target for the next day. Deomoni was owned by Congress leader Kiranchandra Bhattacharjee,' Sanyal pointed out.

Suppressing his anger over the diktat, Sanyal left the Bagdogra police post in haste. On reaching Naxalbari late in the evening, he briefed the other comrades about the discussion he had with Mazumdar. All of them pondered for hours in utter puzzlement, but failed to arrive at a conclusion.

At last, Sanyal announced that they would have to abort the proposed march to Deomoni slated for the next morning.

'Charu *Da* was a senior most member in the party revered by all of us. For me he was like a guiding star, on whom I used to fall back in case of any confusion or dilemma. Hence despite being in total disagreement with him on the issue, I chose to abort the proposed rally just to honour his words.'

'Besides, there was the apprehension that if we barged into Deomoni, it might harm our ties with the INTUC. This would eventually affect the existing united front that we had put up against the tea planters,' Sanyal explained.

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A day after this, that is on 29 June 1955, both the state government and the tea planters announced that they would 'sympathetically consider' the workers' demands. Consequent to this, the strike was called off on day eight.

The joy of this achievement reverberated from one tea estate to another across the Terai, Darjeeling hills and the Dooars.

'It was indeed a historic achievement. It was the first time ever that the tea workers in Bengal were going to get a bonus. Jubilant at the development, *Adivasi* tea workers across the Terai indulged in elaborate celebrations. We, the *Krishak Sabha* leaders, were being felicitated at almost each and every tea garden.'

'As a manifestation of their allegiance to the Communist Party, women tea workers started wearing red scarf as headgear, replacing the old ones of other hues,' Sanyal pointed out.

The West Bengal provincial committee of the CPI announced compensation from party-funds for the families of Margaret's Hope police firing victims. Prominent party leader, Jyoti Basu, who would later become the first Communist Chief Minister of West Bengal, was sent to Darjeeling to hand over the assistance to the affected families.

Sanyal, Biren Bose, Satyendranarayan Mazumdar, Monoranjan Roy, Ratanlal Brahammin, Ananda Pathak and Bhadra Bahadur Hamal accompanied Jyoti Basu to the hills.

'That was the first time I was amidst the tea workers of Darjeeling hills and was very enthralled by their dedication and zeal,' Sanyal recalled.

But amid all these, Sanyal and his close comrades did not forget a pending dispute that they needed to settle.

'A few days after visiting the hills, comrade Keshav Sarkar, Jogen Mukherjee, Panchanan Sarkar and I summoned Charu *Da* to Hatighisha for a meeting. The closed-door meeting was held in the house of a local comrade, Kamal Kanta Singh.'

'In that meeting, all of us subjected Charu *Da* to severe criticism for his "no-strike agreement" with Congress leaders during the tea garden strike. In particular, I denounced him for summoning me to Bagdogra police post and discussing intra-party issues in front of the cops. Charu *Da* had no answer to this and accepted the criticisms without a fuss,' recalled Sanyal.

Sanyal and his group of comrades had later raised the issue at the CPI district secretariat meeting as well. It was briefly discussed but did not lead to any remedial course.

'The matter was suppressed deliberately because condemning Charu *Da*'s move would have also paved the way for raising questions about district secretary Ratanlal Brahammin's role in the Margaret's Hope police firing episode. Most of the Hills comrades were simmering in anger against Brahammin *Daju*; hence he thought it wise to suppress all issues pertaining to the tea garden strike,' explained Sanyal.

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The success of the tea workers' agitation did another wonder; it further consolidated the unity of the workers and the peasantry. As a result, the *Krishak Sabha* now had a formidable force at its disposal, comprising both the tea workers and farmers.

This in turn blurred the distinction between peasant movement and the workers' struggle; it now became a united fight of the toiling masses. The year 1956 began with an agitation demanding uninterrupted irrigation for both the farmlands and tea plantations in and around Bagdogra.

There was a natural canal flowing across the Deomoni Tea Estate owned by Congress leader Kiranchandra Bhattacharjee. The canal used to irrigate farmlands and tea plantations up to 7–8 km downstream to Gangaram Tea Estate. All of a sudden, Bhattacharjee blocked the canal at its point of origin inside the Dalka forest.

The affected farmers plead with him to remove the blockade but Bhattacharjee turned down their repeated requests. It was then that the farmers brought the matter to *Krishak Sabha*'s notice for a redress. *Krishak Sabha* took up the issue and launched a vigorous agitation against the Deomoni owner.

Sanyal, Babulal Biswakarmakar and a few other comrades even tried to remove the blockade forcibly, but the civil administration foiled the attempt at the behest of the tea garden owner by promulgating Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPc) in the area.

In the course of the agitation, police arrested the *Krishak Sabha* activists twice, yet they continued with the fight unperturbed. Ultimately,

Kiranchandra Bhattacharjee had to relent and reinstate the irrigation canal to its original state.

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Next in line were two tyrannical landlords at Choupukhuria village near Bagdogra.

The village had a large tract of farmland sprawling over several hundred acres. Barring a few *cottah*s of vest-land that were under cultivation by 100-odd marginal farmers, landlords Rajnarayan and Bindeswari were the owners of the rest of the large paddy field. The landlord duo was ill-famous for their tyrannical traits.

'They used to rein terror in the village and its surroundings. For instance, before the farmers took to harvesting, the duo would let loose their horses to feed on the paddy. If anyone ever dared a protest, they would whip him up mercilessly. The duo also used to exploit the farmer-ladies and apparently, there was none to put a stop to their tyranny,' Sanyal would narrate.

On learning about the tyranny and exploitation of the peasants, the *Krishak Sabha* gave a call to end the menace once and for all. It soon launched an agitation involving the local populace. But unlike the irrigation canal dispute, the goal this time was not easy to achieve.

The agitation lingered for months and years until 1966 when the two landlords finally gave in. In the course of this prolonged agitation, *Krishak Sabha* established a strong base at Chouphukhuria village under the leadership of Simon Minz.

Minz was a middle-class farmer and lived with his wife Sophia and a nephew. Christian by religion, the couple was childless. Unlike her husband, Sophia was religious to the core and used to attend the Sunday Church Service without a fail. She was the only trained midwife in entire Chouphukhuria and its vicinity which was bereft of health care facility.

'While Simon Minz was one of our dedicated comrades, religious Sophia almost hated the Communists for denying the existence of God. She would let us get a feel of this with her gestures. For example, whenever in the course of *Krishak Sabha* meetings we stayed back at their home, Sophia would extend all sorts of hospitalities but would not converse a single word with us,' Sanyal would recall.

Such reluctance from the family member of a comrade used to pinch Sanyal. This is because, in the Communists' modus operandi, it is always an important task to motivate and involve family members of party cadres in organisational activities. In Sophia's case too, Sanyal and his associates tried this but in vain.

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But there took place an interesting incident one day. It was monsoon and Sanyal and a few other comrades had stayed back at Minz's house after a late evening meeting. It was raining cats and dogs.

After dinner, Sanyal was discussing some pending issues with party comrades when a Muslim farmer from a nearby village knocked at the door. His wife was in advance labour and he wanted Sophia to go along with him immediately to tend to her during the childbirth. But Sophia outrightly turned down the plea saying, she would go only at daybreak.

Helpless, the farmer made repeated appeals explaining that his wife might not survive the next dawn unless she was attended to at once. Yet Sophia did not budge.

Seated in the next room, Sanyal and his comrades were hearing the conversations. They were shocked to discover Sophia's insensibility. After the farmer left dejected, Sanyal summoned Sophia to the room they were seated.

'*I hear you to be very religious who never give the Sunday Church Service a miss*,' Sanyal told Sophia. '*But today you have rejected the pleas of a distressed man whose wife is in advance labour. Tell me, would you have done the same, if the lady were Mother Merry herself?*'

Sophia did not reply, but the impact was instant. Within minutes, accompanied by her nephew, she left for the Muslim farmer's house.

Sophia returned home around 9 o'clock the next morning and informed Sanyal that the lady had given birth to a baby boy and both the mother and the son were doing fine.

'That night had changed Sophia's attitude towards the Communists forever. Barely after a year, she joined the *Krishak Sabha* out of her own volition and soon became one of our best women activists in the Terai,' Sanyal would recall.

Sophia's involvement with the Communist Movement grew stronger by the day; after the untimely demise of her husband Simon Minz due to cirrhosis, she became a party whole-timer. During the 1967 Naxalbari Movement, she was arrested by police and after being released on bail, she went underground.

'While in hiding, Sophia was inflicted with pneumonia. As her condition deteriorated, I wrote to Charu *Da* asking him to arrange for her accommodation in Siliguri and facilitate her a proper treatment. But Charu *Da* did not entertain the idea; with no other way out, I then sent her to Birpara in Dooars, where lived my sister.'

'Unfortunately, an ailing Sophia could not locate my sister's house and came back to Naxalbari. She died after about seven days,' Sanyal would recollect.

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In 1957, came the Assembly general election in West Bengal. The CPI again formed an alliance with like-minded political parties and christened it as the United Left Election Committee (ULEC).

The other parties in the alliance were the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), Forward Bloc (FB) and the Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB).

Among the coalition partners, CPI alone put up candidates in 103 Assembly constituencies out of the total 252. For the two Assembly segments in Siliguri subdivision, the Siliguri-Phansidewa (General) and Siliguri-Phansidewa (Tribal), the party nominated Satyendranarayan Mazumdar and Jangal Santhal, respectively.

'Satyendranarayan Mazumdar was a senior member of the party's Darjeeling district secretariat. He was a freedom fighter of the *Anushilan* group and was jailed in the Andaman Cellular Jail for eight years. Post-Independence, he was released from jail and joined the Communist Party right way. A very learned man, he used to speak French, Russian, English, Hindi, Nepali and a little bit of Santali as well,' Sanyal pointed out.

Satyendranarayan Mazumdar won the 1957 Assembly election from the Siliguri-Phansidewa General seat, but Jangal Santhal could not sail through from the tribal constituency. Jangal lost by around 1147 votes,

primarily because of the CPI's weak base at Bhojnarayan, Hashkhowa and Tuna tea estates.

Confusion among the voters in Siliguri town over exercising the double voting rights was also responsible for his defeat.

'The voters in Siliguri subdivision were entitled to two votes—one for the general seat and one for the tribal constituency. But in some parts of Siliguri town, our voters got confused and exercised their franchise only for the General segment,' Sanyal explained.

As regards the overall scenario, the CPI-led ULEC coalition wrested 85 Assembly seats in the state. CPI raised its individual tally to 46 from 28 in 1952; its allies PSP bagged 21 seats, FB eight, RSP three and MFB two seats. Yet it was the Congress that stood victorious by winning 152 Assembly seats and formed the government in West Bengal once again.

The victory of Satyendranarayan Mazumdar in Siliguri came as an enticement for the Communist activists of Terai. They plunged into organisational activities with renewed vigour and energy. *Krishak Sabha* also stepped up its fight championing the cause of the farmers and the tea workers.

CHAPTER TEN

In 1958, the Provincial *Kisan* Committee (PKC), state wing of the *Krishak Sabha*, gave the call for repealing all illegal land transfers made by the landlords in West Bengal between 5 March 1953 and 5 May 1955.

The term 'illegal transfer' denoted the re-registration of ceiling-surplus land above the permitted limit of 24.8 acres. The landlords did so by splitting their total holdings into smaller units and then getting them registered in the name of their kin and acquaintances. This deprived the sharecroppers the ownership of ceiling-surplus land that they had been tilling for ages.

The cut-off date for repealing the illegal land transfers was fixed to 1955 as that was when the Congress-led state government had enacted the West Bengal Land Reforms Act. The Act had the provision that ownership of all ceiling-surplus land would vest with the sharecroppers who had been cultivating them.

The Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha*, however, was opposed to the PKC's piecemeal settlement formula. They were not in favour of fixing any cut-off date for restoring ceiling-surplus land to the sharecroppers.

'Our demand was that the transfer of land should be declared null and void in its entirety, irrespective of when the transfer was made. This pitched us against the PKC leadership, resulting in an internal cold war,' Sanyal would recall.

Consequent to these differences, the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha* convened an open conference at Bagdogra to take a final call on the issue. Biswanath Mukherjee, the PKC president and a member of the CPI provincial secretariat, was invited to the conference as state observer.

'Comrade Mukherjee spoke for over two hours, advocating PKC's stand in favour of fixing a cut-off date for repealing illegal land transfers. After he had finished, it was my turn to present the counterview and I argued that fixing a cut-off date would ruin the very purpose of land reforms that we were fighting for.'

'Following the open debate, a secret poll was conducted to know the opinion of the house. In the voting, PKC's views were outvoted by a huge margin,' Sanyal said.

Charu Mazumdar, who too was present in the conference, apparently did not take a clear position on the issue. He neither supported nor rejected the district *Krishak Sabha*'s views.

'Once the conference was over, Charu *Da* asked me to convene an extended meeting of the *Krishak Sabha*'s district secretariat. The agenda was to take a close look on the resolution passed in the district conference and chalk out strategies to implement the resolution, if at all,' Sanyal continued.

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In the extended meeting held a few days later, the district secretariat ratified the resolution and decided to implement it with full vigour. For this, the district secretariat coined a new slogan—*Nij Khamare Dhan Tolo,* reap the paddy to your own warehouse.

The district *Krishak Sabha* announced that henceforth, farmers would take home all their harvest without giving the landlords a share. A decision on whether to give the landlords anything would be taken by the *Krishak Sabha* at a later stage. That was an extremely daring announcement and challenging too.

Because, traditionally, the practice had been to reap the harvest first to the landlords' warehouses and then wait for their whims and mercy to get a share.

Meanwhile, an interesting development took place at the end of the *Krishak Sabha* district secretariat meet.

'By way of succession, Charu *Da* was also a *Zamindar* and owned a huge tract of farmland both in Siliguri and Jalpaiguri. After the district secretariat meet, one of Charu *Da*'s subjects present there approached me seeking advice on his course of action; if the sharecropper was to follow *Krishak Sabha*'s instruction, he would have to deprive Charu *Da* of a share of the harvest.'

'Charu *Da* was standing next to me; seizing the opportunity, I asked the sharecropper to seek advice from him instead. Although very hesitant at first, the farmer did finally turn to Charu *Da*. To our delight, Charu *Da* responded by saying that his land should also be treated like that of other landlords and there was no scope for any confusion. Charu *Da* said this despite the fact that he had inherited the plots from his forefathers and not through illegal transfers.'

'It so happened that from that day onwards, Charu *Da* never claimed a share of the harvest from any of his sharecroppers. Also he never asserted the ownership over the tracts of land in question. This gesture impressed me immensely; my respect for Charu *Da* went up by many folds,' Sanyal pointed out.

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Subsequent to the district *Krishak Sabha*'s call, from December 1958 onwards, the peasants in Terai started reaping the paddy harvest to their own warehouses. And after every such action, they unfurled the CPI's red flag on their housetop.

In some areas, *Krishak Sabha* volunteers also set up co-operative warehouses and the farmers stored the harvest there. Unable to withstand the ever-growing trend, desperate landowners knocked at the administration's door. They demanded that Section 144 of the CrPc be promulgated in the entire Terai to stop the farmers from reaping the harvest. With the Congress backing the landlords, pressure on the administration was mounting by the day.

'Gurukram Mazumdar was the Siliguri SDO then. On the face of ever mounting pressure, one day he summoned Charu *Da* and me to his office. He informed us that he had already received 26 petitions from the landlords asking for imposition of Section 144 across the Terai and many more such petitions were pouring in every day.'

'The argument of the landlords was that unless prohibitory orders were imposed, the farmers would soon resort to loot as well. But before arriving at a decision on this, the SDO wanted to hear our version of the story,' recalled Sanyal.

Responding to this, Sanyal and Mazumdar assured the SDO that if the landlords refrain from making any advances, the peasantry would do no harm to them, leave aside the question of looting their property. The officer was convinced by the assurance and dropped the idea of invoking Section 144 of the CrPc.

Yet because of the persistent misinformation campaign by the landlords, it became a general public perception in Siliguri that the *Krishak Sabha* activists would be out on a looting spree any day soon. As is obvious, the business community got very scared at the apprehension.

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In those days, the Matigara *Haat* on Siliguri's outskirts used to be a prominent marketplace with shoppers from Darjeeling hills, Sikkim and even the far-flung Nepal Terai converging to buy provisions and apparels, etc.

'It was a Tuesday in 1959—the weekly market day at Matigara *Haat*; we took out a rally of some 3,000-odd peasants and workers. En route the final destination, the rally was to traverse through the *Haat*.'

'As was common to all our rallies, the participants were carrying sticks, spears, bows and arrows and other traditional weapons. We were marching ahead shouting *Inquilaab Zindabad*, long live the revolution; *Krishak Sabha Zindabad,* long live the *Krishak Sabha*; *Langol Jar Jami Tar*, land to the tillers; *Nij Khamare Dhan Tolo*, reap the paddy to your own warehouse and so on.'

'Getting a wind of the rally, a police team was posted in advance outside the *Haat*. Despite this, when we marched in, there was not even a single trader in the *Haat*! Fearing attack and loot by *Krishak Sabha* activists, they had fled leaving their shops open.'

'But following my instruction, none of our 3,000-odd activists touched even a single item at the unattended shops; we marched ahead in strict discipline,' Sanyal recalled with a sense of pride.

The landlords, on the other hand, were far from being gentle and disciplined. By then they had looted the *Krishak Sabha*'s co-operative warehouses in a number of villages.

The rally had barely marched out of Matigara *Haat* when the news came that landlord Bhagwan Dayal has looted the harvest from a village north of Patharghata. The landlord's private guards had reaped the entire harvest of a 144-bigha paddy field.

'The Congress party was solely dedicated to protect the vested interests of the landlords; its leaders were serving notices on farmers, fixing arbitrary dates for distribution of harvests. In reality it was only a ploy to grab all the harvests from the farmers,' Sanyal would point out.

Hence, when Congress leaders served a similar notice on some 44-odd farmers at Ranidanga village near Phansidewa, the *Krishak Sabha* leadership realised, it was time to get ready for a face-off. Accordingly, Sanyal chalked out a plan to resist the landlord-gentry and began mobilising farmer-activists from across the Siliguri subdivision.

On the intervening night of the day fixed by Congress leaders, a large contingent of peasants armed with traditional weapons started gathering at the Bagdogra *Krishak Sabha* office. Many more activists waited on the courtyard of sympathiser households in nearby villages.

It was a chilling February night and to beat the cold, most of the farmers were wearing blankets known as *Dusa* among the *Adivasis*. As the farmers began pouring into Bagdogra in small groups, the police on patrol intercepted them and enquired. But the cops did not suspect anything as the farmers had hidden the weapons under their *Dusa*.

'At daybreak, I set out rallying with a contingent of nearly 5,000 farmers, all deadly armed with traditional arms and weapons. We arranged the rally in such a way that it felt like, as if, it was a troop of the *Mughal Army* out on a war.'

'On the front rows were men equipped with bows and arrows, followed next by those with spears. On the third row were baton-wielding activists and behind all of them were the women cadres. Our target was to cover a distance of about 10 km and reach Ranidanga village at the earliest possible. As we marched through the village

trails and paddy fields, villagers woke up in astonishment, wondering where the rally was heading to!' Sanyal elaborated in a bated breath.

It was not long before that, the huge rally reached Ranidanga and encircled the landlord households and warehouses stacked up with the season's harvest.

Getting to know of this, a police team from Siliguri soon rushed in. But the police team was so meagre in number as compared to the huge rally that the cops stood idle at a safe distance.

Under Sanyal's supervision, farmers of the village started lugging back the harvests to their homes from the landlords' warehouses.

As the process continued, assuring safety, Sanyal summoned the officer leading the police team. He asked the officer to register a complaint for the past week's harvest loot by the landlords at Patharghata. The police officer had no other option but to oblige; however, he sought to know what would happen to the harvests that the farmers were now taking away here at Ranidanga village.

'*The harvests will remain at the peasant households*,' Sanyal replied, '*Let the landlords decide which part of the land (within the ceiling limit) they wish to retain, we shall return them the corresponding share of the harvest*.'

The officer nodded in assent as the farmers continued to stockpile the paddy at their homes. 'Majority of them were old farmers and you wouldn't believe, tears rolled down their eyes as they took the harvest home. Taking my hands in theirs, they said, never before in their life they ever had the fortune to take home the crop they grew. It was indeed a poignant moment!' Sanyal recalled.

That night, Sanyal and his comrades were treated like kings. Every farmer households at Ranidanga village cooked the best dishes and desserts to fete the *Krishak Sabha* leaders; they were being dragged into one invitation after another.

'At one point, the situation became such that I had to rudely remind the peasants that there was a limit how much food a person could consume,' Sanyal said, his face glowing in recollection of that day.

Following the success of Ranidanga venture, *Krishak Sabha*'s *Nij Khamare Dhan Tolo*, agitation got a shot in the arm. Farmers across Siliguri subdivision started reaping their harvest back home, giving a damn to the threats by the landlord gentry. At several places, the

situation took such a turn that the peasants even confined armed police force for trying to intervene at the landlords' behest.

With the situation going out of the administration's control, Gurukram Mazumdar, the SDO Siliguri, came in the direct line of fire of the Congress-backed landlord lobby. He was transferred from Siliguri abruptly.

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The affected landlords filed over 70 litigations against the *Krishak Sabha* activists; Sanyal was named in at least 25 of them. But he hardly cared.

'1959 was a tumultuous year. The farmers had got so sensitised and proactive that it could have been the real opportunity to realise a peasant revolution in our part of the country. In fact, in my opinion, 1959 had more potentials than 1967 when the Naxalbari Movement actually broke out,' Sanyal used to testify.

But the PKC was hell-bent on curbing the agitation; they were not in favour of taking it forward. Significantly, Charu Mazumdar, who had earlier approved the district *Krishak Sabha*'s aggressive style of operation, sided with the state leadership. Keeping up with PKC's directive, the CPI Siliguri MLA, Satyendranarayan Mazumdar, also stood up against the Terai agitation and even called it 'illegal'.

'To quell the agitation, PKC president Biswanath Mukherjee once again came down to Siliguri. He convinced Charu *Da* that the agitation would have to be aborted immediately; I was asked to convene a district *Krishak Sabha* meeting to evaluate the agitation.'

'I convened the meeting at Choupukhuria village, but being a fugitive I could reach there only after dusk. To my surprise, even before I had arrived, they concluded the meeting and in consultation with Biswanath Mukherjee, Charu *Da* announced an immediate withdrawal of the agitation.'

'This was done despite the fact that I was then the secretary of the district *Krishak Sabha* and was personally leading the agitation at the ground,' Sanyal pointed out.

In that meeting, it was also decided that Sanyal and other key leaders would surrender to the police in connection with the litigations pending against them. The decision to call off the agitation at

its peak left Sanyal utterly frustrated. Dejected, he temporarily left the Naxalbari area and relocated his base to the *Krishak Sabha* office at Bagdogra. He decided to take rest for a few days.

'During that period, I would often go to the nearby Gosainpur village in the evening and lying down below the rail over-bridge there, would introspect. I was very disturbed; on one hand, the party talks of a peasant revolution and on the other, the state leaders are opposed to any aggressive agitation! Even Charu *Da* is siding with them!'

'The more I pondered, the more I got confused. That was when a distrust against the party leadership began germinating in me,' recalled Sanyal.

A few days later, toeing the party's diktat, Sanyal and his co-activists surrendered to the police and were sent to the Siliguri Subdivisional Jail.

Although Sanyal got bail in all the cases one after another, but given the large number of cases, the bails were effected not before he had spent four months behind the bars.

Out on bail, he went to Calcutta to attend the 1960 state conference of the PKC. The conference was held at Muslim Institute Hall in the city. There Sanyal was pilloried severely for leading the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha* into an agitation not ratified by the provincial committee. But the state conference stopped short of initiating any disciplinary action against him.

Later that year, trials began into the cases involving Sanyal; most of the litigations could not stand in the courts for want of adequate evidence and witness. But in two or three cases, the lower courts in Siliguri convicted him and Sanyal was sentenced to 13-month imprisonment at the Beherampur Central Jail in Murshidabad district.

Sanyal filed an appeal at the Calcutta High Court, but by the time the High Court acquitted him, he had already served the full jail term. When he finally walked out free in late 1961, India and China were on the brink of war and the CPI stood divided along the pro- and anti-China line.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The first Indo-China War over the border disputes in Arunachal Pradesh broke out in June 1962. On the pretext of maintaining internal security, the government of India ordered immediate arrests of all pro-China leaders of the CPI.

In West Bengal, over 150 frontline CPI leaders including Jyoti Basu, Promod Dasgupta, Harekrishna Konar, Charu Mazumdar and others were put behind the bars under the Defence of India Rules. All such political prisoners, hailing from different parts of the state, were lodged at the Dum Dum Central Jail in Calcutta.

To avert an arrest, Sanyal went underground and pursued the party activities in a clandestine manner. Being one among the CPI's pro-China faction, he stopped the sale of party mouthpiece, *Swadhinota* in Siliguri. The logic being that the organ was trying to 'induce bourgeois nationalist sentiments' in the readers.

Sanyal could not evade arrest for long; the police nabbed him on 4 December 1962. He too was sent to the Dum Dum Central Jail, where, by then, almost all prominent leaders of the CPI in West Bengal had found accommodation.

To the Communist leaders of West Bengal, the days spent at Dum Dum Jail were more of an opportunity to introspect, discuss and debate the basis of the growing factionalism within the party.

'With so many leaders lodged under the same roof, Dum Dum Central Jail became the *de facto* headquarters for the party's West Bengal Provincial Committee. Many a time, we would assemble at the jail's central atrium and discuss our ideological standings and strategic issues,' Sanyal said.

The CPI was then divided into three factions: the *nationalists*, the *internationalists* and the *centrist*.

The *nationalists* led by party general secretary, S.A. Dange, were supporting India's war on China. The *internationalists* denounced the war and stood in favour of China. They had also made up their mind to break away from the CPI. The *centrists*, on the other hand, although in favour of a friendly relationship with China, were not ready to split from the CPI as yet.

'The rift was very much perceivable inside the jail premises. While leaders such as Charu Mazumdar were advocating the *internationalist* views, Jyoti Basu, Promod Dasgupta, Harekrishna Konar and others were still undecided and they were tagged as *centrists*.'

'Charu *Da* was very vocal about his standpoint and in fact proposed that the Provincial Committee should observe 1 October as the Chinese Revolution Day inside the jail premises itself. His proposal was outrightly turned down, but that could not deter Charu *Da* from propagating his agenda.'

'Instead, going a step further, Charu *Da* declared himself a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Although majority of the CPI Darjeeling district leaderships including me were inclined towards the *internationalist* viewpoint, we found the announcement a little too excess,' Sanyal would point out.

In the meantime, Harekrishna Konar initiated a debate on the *Agrarian Question* and *Agrarian Revolution*. Most of the jailed leaders put forth their respective views, but none of the contradicting opinions found a meeting ground, vis-à-vis the strategy to realise a Communist revolution in India.

'Charu *Da* did not take part in those debates. That was probably because he had already got into a controversy by giving a call to observe

the Chinese Revolution Day and did not want to fuel the controversy further,' Sanyal observed.

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With the end of Sino-India War in November 1962, the government of India started releasing the jailed CPI leaders one by one. Among the first few leaders to be released were Jyoti Basu, Harekrishna Konar and Charu Mazumdar. Sanyal, Promod Dasgupta and a few others continued to be behind the bars for a few more months.

'At one point, it was only Promod *Da* and I among all the political prisoners to be left in the jail; hence we were shifted to the same cell. This gave me an opportunity to ask and discuss with Promod *Da* various aspects of the ideological differences within the CPI. I also tried to learn about his assessment on the future of the Communist Movement in India.'

'Promod *Da* too being a *centrist* leader avoided taking a clear position on controversial issues such as the ways and means of the peasant revolution. He said, in spite of the ideological contradictions, splitting the party was the last option.'

'From his response and the non-committal attitude of the leaders such as Jyoti Basu and Harekrishna Konar, I got the feel that even if the CPI splits, the new faction too would never take a radical approach to herald a Communist revolution in India,' Sanyal observed.

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Sanyal was freed from the Dum Dum Central Jail on 26 January 1963, which was about a week before Promod Dasgupta's release.

It was already late in the afternoon; Sanyal could neither return to Siliguri nor had a place to spend the night in Calcutta. Dasgupta advised him to go to the party commune at Karaya Road in the city and Sanyal accepted the idea.

At the party commune, he met Muzzaffar Ahmed, popularly known among fellow comrades as *Kakababu*. It was not long before, that the two of them got enmeshed in a discussion over the ideological differences within the party. In the course of the conversation, Sanyal sensed that *Kakababu* was also 'non-committal' on the question of breaking away from the CPI.

'He was very shrewd in his thought process and used to fickle about his political views. I remember, on one occasion, he had advised me against visiting Amritsar to attend the *All India Kisan Sabha* (AIKS) conference. The logic was that, given the central leaderships' compromising attitude, attending the conference would ultimately turn out to be a futile exercise.'

'*Kakababu* was one of the leaders who had opposed the naming of CPI's highest decision-making body as National Council; his argument was that we should not get confined in the narrow scope of nationalism. For Communists, nationalism and internationalism were interdependent, he had reasoned,' Sanyal pointed out.

On spending the night at the Calcutta party commune, Sanyal set out for Siliguri the next morning. On reaching Siliguri, the first thing he did was to pay a visit to Charu Mazumdar, bedridden at his Mahanandapara house due to ill health.

Sanyal briefed him on the discussions he had with Promod Dasgupta and Muzzaffar Ahmed and also apprised Mazumdar about his perception that both the CPI and the new party in offing would eventually compromise on the issue of Agrarian Question and the strategy for an Indian revolution.

'*While the CPI is overtly revisionist, the new party too is all set to take a middle path*,' Sanyal told.

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The feud in CPI reached the climax on 11 April 1964. Thirty-two of its National Council members walked out from the party conference at Tenali in Andhra Pradesh, paving the way for the formation of a new party—the CPI (Marxists), CPI-M in short.

Notwithstanding the gulf of difference on the issues of peasant revolution, revolutionary strategies, etc., Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal and other leaders from the CPI Darjeeling district committee sided with the new party.

Charu Mazumdar being bedridden, representing the Darjeeling district committee, Sanyal and Sourin Bose went to Calcutta in October 1964 to attend the CPI-M's first state conference. At the conference venue, the organisers had put up portraits of all leading Marxists leaders and ideologues from across the globe, but surprisingly, there was no portrait of Mao Tse-tung of China.

Registering a protest over this, Sanyal and Bose vociferously vented their anger during the delegate session. They argued that despite Mao being one of the most popular living Marxists, what could be the reason for not putting up his portrait alongside Lenin, Stalin, Engles and other world figures from the Communist Movement.

'Several state and central leaders, including Jyoti Basu, were seated on the dais. They were visibly embarrassed as we raised the question, but the house full of delegates backed us with a heavy applause. The leaders had no answer, no justifiable reason for sidelining Mao Tse-tung. To me it was only a vindication that right at birth the CPI-M had compromised on the fundamental issue of waging a revolution,' recalled Sanyal.

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Barely a month after his return from the Calcutta state conference, one evening, as Sanyal was cycling his way to Naxalbari, the police arrested him near Bagdogra. It was 4 December 1964.

This time Sanyal was arrested on charges of harbouring links with the Naga and Manipuri insurgents hailing from north-east India. He was booked under the Preventive Detention Act, which had been an instrument that the authorities abused frequently to put people behind the bars for an indefinite period without trial.

After a night at the Siliguri Sub-Jail, Sanyal was shifted to the Dum Dum Central Jail in Calcutta. During that period, several other Communist leaders from Darjeeling district were also arrested on varied pretexts. Most of the charges was concocted.

'During my stay at the Beherampore Jail in 1960–61, F.Z. Simre of the Nagaland underground ministry was my co-prisoner. It was then that I learnt from Simre at length about the nationhood movement in Nagaland. In turn, Simre enquired about the Communist Movement that we were waging and was very impressed by our endeavours.'

'Simre promised, if ever released from jail, he would take me to Nagaland and assist me to establish the Communist Party there. Both of us had also exchanged each other's contacts. But that is all. We neither met again nor did we communicate,' Sanyal said explaining the context of his arrest.

Lodged in Dum Dum Jail, Sanyal and other fellow leaders from Darjeeling started reviewing the policies and activities of the

CPI-M. The more they discussed, the more they discovered the compromising attitude of the party's central leadership. They soon concluded: 'If the CPI was practicing revisionism overtly, the CPI-M too was toeing the same line, albeit covertly.'

'The CPI-M state leadership got a wind of this growing discontent among the comrades from Darjeeling. To negate the chances of a revolt, they planted a prisoner comrade from their camp into our group. However keen to avert an immediate commotion, we became cautious and started carrying out the discussions secretly in small groups,' Sanyal said.

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Sanyal was released in June 1966 after he had spent nearly one and a half years at the Dum Dum Jail. By then, bedridden at his Mahanandapara residence in Siliguri, a critically ill Charu Mazumdar had penned seven write-ups in Bengali, articulating the need and strategy for an immediate armed Communist insurrection in India.

The articles that Mazumdar wrote were: (1) What possibility the year 1965 is indicating (1965), (2) Carry on the struggle against modern revisionism (1965), (3) Make the people's democratic revolution successful by fighting against revisionism (1965), (4) What is the source of the spontaneous revolutionary outbursts in India? (9 April 1965), (5) Take this opportunity (1966), (6) Our tasks in the present situation (28 January 1966) and (7) Carry forward the peasant struggle by fighting revisionism (1966).

Another write-up—The main task today is the struggle to build up the true revolutionary party through uncompromising struggle against revisionism—was added to the series on 8 December 1966.

These eight articles by Charu Mazumdar later became famous as the *Historic Eight Documents*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Charu Mazumdar had begun drafting the *Historic Eight Documents* in early 1965. As he scribbled the *Documents* one after another, his trusted comrades secretly smuggled those into the Dum Dum Jail for circulation among fellow leaders hailing from the Darjeeling district.

As a result, Sanyal had the opportunity to pursue the articles in rapt attention while in the jail itself. Through the *Eight Documents*, Mazumdar was advocating an armed insurrection that would usher in a Communist revolution in India; the end-goal was to put a stop to the perpetual exploitation of the working class and establish a just and equal society.

Until then, the articles were circulated only among a handful of select Communist leaders; the public at large did not have a clue to the write-ups. But in September 1965, taking all his close aides by surprise, Charu Mazumdar suddenly gave an open call for armed struggle. The news appeared in English daily *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, creating quite a furore within and outside the CPI-M.

In June 1966, on his return to Siliguri after being released from Dum Dum Jail, Sanyal straightway went to meet Mazumdar. He

wanted to share his views on the revolutionary strategies suggested by Mazumdar.

'In the *Eight Documents*, Charu *Da* had prescribed an immediate armed insurrection. To realise this, he suggested the formation of small combat groups of dedicated Communist revolutionaries; the combat groups were to operate secretly. The immediate target, Charu *Da* identified, were the landlords, high officials from the police and the civil administration. Those opposed to the revolutionary activities were also in the list.'

'Significantly, Charu *Da* denounced the need for nurturing mass organisations. He labelled mass organisations as revisionist tools and held them responsible for weakening the revolutionary zeal of the comrades,' Sanyal pointed out.

Although Sanyal, Keshav Sarkar, Jangal Santhal, Sourin Bose and other leading comrades were in total agreement with Charu Mazumdar on the need for an armed insurrection, Sanyal differed strongly on the timing and strategy to implement the proposed uprising.

'I told Charu *Da*, we too abhor the CPI-M's growing affinity for electoral politics. We concede that armed struggle is the only way forward for Communist revolutionaries of India, but we do not accept the suggestion that the insurrection should be initiated tomorrow itself.'

'The reason being that most of our leading comrades including myself were in jail almost all through 1962 to 1965 and owing to this, the organisation at the grass roots was in total disarray. The first and foremost task before us is to spruce up the organisation and rejuvenate the activists on the ground. Furthermore, I strongly opposed Charu *Da*'s undermining the role of mass organisations in realising a Communist revolution.'

'*No revolution can achieve success and sustenance by remaining isolated from the masses. The formation of small combat groups and the conspiratorial individual killing, which you are prescribing, would only push us towards a wrong direction.* I told Charu *Da* point-blank,' recalled Sanyal.

Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar soon got into a passionate argument over the divergent views; the debate continued for hours. With both of them being firm on their respective viewpoints, Mazumdar tried to

dissuade Sanyal by saying that the issues had already been discussed with other comrades and they were in total agreement with Mazumdar.

At this, Sanyal countered: '*Discussing the matter with your own coterie and getting their assent does not mean you have won the collective support of all comrades who are working on the ground day and night.*'

Having failed to convince Sanyal, Mazumdar now tried to hit him at the ideological core. Invoking Lenin, he said: '*You are disobeying Lenin's teachings by opposing the idea of an immediate armed insurrection.*'

Far from getting carried away, Sanyal responded by pointing out that Lenin had never prescribed an armed insurrection without preparing the ground and that too without taking the masses into confidence.

'This time, Charu *Da* refrained from putting forward any fresh argument. Instead, he informed me that a new faction of the Communist revolutionaries had been formed in the underground. *The comrades want to meet you*, he told.'

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'Actually, by then, it had become clear to us that it was not possible to continue in the CPI-M any longer; revolutionary Communists will have to float a new organisation. Although a formal announcement to this effect was yet to come, the new faction had already plunged into activity,' Sanyal pointed out.

The CPI-M Darjeeling district committee was practically overpowered by the new faction. Barring Ratanlal Brahammin, Biren Bose, Ananda Pathak and two to three other prominent figures, rest of the Darjeeling district committee had sided with the revolutionary faction. Within the main district committee, the new faction was secretly running a 'shadow committee' of its own.

Having gained total control of the district committee, the new faction headed by Charu Mazumdar now decided to capture the *Darjeeling Zilla Chia Kaman Mazdoor Union*, the tea workers union of the CPI-M in Darjeeling. They decided to replace Ratanlal Brahammin and Ananda Pathak from the post of president and secretary of the union, respectively.

'For this, all the likeminded comrades assembled in a secret meeting at Charu *Da*'s residence. After elaborate discussions, it

was decided that from each of the tea gardens two representatives belonging to our faction would attend the *Union*'s district conference slated to be held soon at Chungthung tea estate in Kurseong. An alternative panel for the union's central committee would be proposed at the meet.'

'But when the D-Day arrived, the resolution was not adhered to. The previous panel headed by Brahammin and Pathak recaptured the union. On being queried about this later, Charu *Da* said that since mass organisations were not deemed necessary in the revolutionary pursuit, there was hardly any use of capturing the tea union.'

'The reality was that while we were running a secret faction against the CPI-M, within that faction, Charu *Da* was nurturing yet another sub-faction comprising his own coterie of comrades. Deepak Biswas—a sixth-year dropout from North Bengal University in Siliguri and comrade Krishna Bhakta Poudiyal from Kalimpong were among the few in Charu *Da*'s coterie,' Sanyal said.

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Consequent to Charu Mazumdar's call to arms, the CPI-M provincial committee expelled him from the party in late 1966. Promod Dasgupta personally came down to Siliguri to convey Mazumdar the message.

'Promod *Da* briefed us about the provincial committee's decision and asked Sourin Bose and me to accompany him to Charu *Da*'s residence for conveying the expulsion message. Notwithstanding the differences with Charu *Da*, I questioned the validity of the decision.'

'*The party is run by a constitution. How come you people expel Charu Da without serving him a charge sheet and without giving him a chance for self-defence?* I argued. But Promod *Da* hushed up the matter; he maintained that the PC was empowered to do so,' Sanyal recalled.

Overcoming their initial hesitation, Sanyal and Sourin Bose finally accompanied Promod Dasgupta to Charu Mazumdar's residence.

'I still remember, on conveying Charu *Da* the expulsion decision Promod *Da* said: *Charu, you are looking at revolution from the rooftop of your house.* Then, both of them laughed like a child.'

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The differences between Charu Mazumdar and Kanu Sanyal on the issue of revolutionary strategies reached a high point. To save the organisation of consequential damage, it now became imperative to work out a solution.

All these, however, were happening away from the public knowledge; in public perception, Mazumdar and Sanyal were united in their opinions, striving collectively against the centrist attitude of the CPI-M.

But the real scenario being just the opposite, to find a solution to the deadlock, the faction of revolutionary Communists of Darjeeling district convened a joint convention of all the activists from the tea gardens and the peasantry. The convention was organised at Burraganj—a remote village located 7 km off Naxalbari.

At the daylong convention, senior leader Sourin Bose presented Charu Mazumdar's viewpoints; Sanyal put forth his own. Other delegates followed suit one after another and placed their opinions.

'Majority of the delegates from Darjeeling hills spoke in favour of Charu *Da*'s strategy of targeting individual class enemies. However when it came to the majority opinion, there were a sizeable number of comrades who firmly stood by me. They conceded that a revolution could not be effected without the backing of mass organisations,' Sanyal recalled. With both the diverging views being almost equal in strength, the convention ended up adopting a unique resolution.

'It decided to experiment both the strategies at two separate locations in Siliguri subdivision on the conditions that whichever of the two evoked a positive result, would be accepted as the undisputable strategy for waging a revolution. It was agreed upon that Charu *Da* and his followers would implement his strategy at Chathat area under the Phansidewa block; we would try our method at Naxalbari,' Sanyal pointed out.

A few days later, both the groups plunged into action at their respective experimental zones. Charu Mazumdar's followers launched secret attacks on landlords and police after dusk, resulting in a number of casualties. Sanyal and his associates concentrated on organising mass meetings and rallies and taking possession of the ceiling-surplus land from landlords.

'The outcome: at Chathat, the common villagers became apprehensive of falling prey to unidentified miscreants who strike at night

and in the absence of any overt organisational activity of Charu Mazumdar's followers, they started to depend on the police for protection. But at Naxalbari, the rallies and mass meetings with traditional arms-weapons and the open face-off with the landlord gentry made the workers and peasants very vigorous.'

'To evaluate the result of the two experiments, all the leading revolutionary comrades assembled again. Charu *Da*'s prescription for raising small combat groups and annihilating the class enemies was rejected,' Sanyal pointed out.

Yet Mazumdar did not give up his strategy, which eventually became clear from his future activities. As a result, the Communists of Darjeeling district got entangled in a multifaceted fight both against the state machineries and also amongst themselves.

On one hand, keeping in tune with the state party's agenda, the Darjeeling district CPI-M was striving against state oppression and mis-governance; on the other, the radical faction within the district committee led by Charu Mazumdar was battling it out against the centrist policies of the CPI-M's central leadership. While this radical faction was united in their opposition to the CPI-M central leadership, as regards the strategy for waging a revolution, it stood divided.

Broadly, the two divisions in the revolutionary pursuit were—one, the Charu Mazumdar line, and two, the Kanu Sanyal line. Deepak Biswas, Krishna Bhakta Poudiyal, Sourin Bose and a few more belonged to the Charu Mazumdar camp; Sanyal enjoyed the support of Keshav Sarkar, Jangal Santhal and several others who were active at the field. Interestingly, the public at large, including the media, were unaware of this rift.

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Towards the end of 1966, the political situation in West Bengal became extremely volatile. Protesting over the scarcity of food, the CPI-M launched a long-drawn out food movement in southern West Bengal. The movement was further fuelled by a simultaneous agitation demanding adequate supply of subsidised kerosene oil.

The Congress-led West Bengal government tried its best to stifle the agitation by exercising force, but failed. The state suppression, on the contrary, helped the agitation grow and spread in every nook and corner of West Bengal, including the northern districts.

Adding to the state government's owes, in the month of September, the Communist trade unions convened a general strike in the tea plantations of north Bengal. The strike was convened to press for a wage hike.

On the first day of the tea strike, police opened fire on an agitating group of tea workers in the Darjeeling hills. A worker, Bire Pradhan, died in the incident. The police firing deteriorated an already volatile law and order situation; the tea workers in the Terai took to the streets in protest. *Krishak Sabha* activists joined hands with the workers; united they began rallying across Terai with traditional arms and weapons.

'We issued clear instructions to the activists that in the event of a face-off with police, they should not only respond with an armed offensive but also snatch the firearms from the cops. During one such protest rally at Bagdogra, our cadres literally came on the brink of a direct face-off with police. But the officer-in-charge of the Bagdogra police investigation centre, who was leading the cops, averted the collision with prudence,' Sanyal pointed out.

During this spate of agitations, while Charu Mazumdar was bedridden at home, most of the other Communist leaders in Terai, including Sanyal, were in underground and running the movement secretly.

But while campaigning for a CPI-M convened state-wide 72-hour shutdown over the scarcity of food, Sanyal's close aide, Jangal Santhal, got arrested. He was immediately sent to the Dum Dum Central Jail in Calcutta. Within a few days from that, Sanyal was also nabbed by the police at Naxalbari and was shifted to the same Dum Dum Jail.

'The circumstance leading to my arrest was quite a mystery. On the said day, the then Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi was in Darjeeling to inaugurate the Himalayan Zoological Park. Because of this, the police across the district were on a high alert.'

'In the course of the on-going agitation, comrade Keshav Sarkar and I were camping at Choupukhuria under Phansidewa block when a communiqué from Charu *Da* reached me via a party supporter. In the letter, Charu *Da* mentioned about a trouble at Naxalbari and advised me to go there personally to take stock of the situation.'

'As directed, Keshav and I reached Naxalbari within a few hours. We had just stepped into a local tea stall when a police team surrounded

us; they took us to the police station located close by. The OC of the Naxalbari police station, Sailen Mukherjee, informed that we were under arrest under the Preventive Detention Act.'

'I challenged the arrest asking the OC to produce an arrest warrant, but he failed to do so. Thus, after about two hours, we were allowed to walkout of the police station. Out on the streets, without wasting even a single minute, we cycled our way to the nearby Hatighisha village.'

'Starving since morning, we stopped by the lone food stall there to eat whatever was available. We had hardly finished a cup of tea that all of a sudden the Naxalbari police team surfaced again. They encircled us. This time, the OC approached me with a tint of smile spread all over his face: *Kanu Babu, here is your arrest warrant. It reached us a little after you left the police station.*'

'The warrant was issued only against me. So the police let Keshav Sarkar go,' Sanyal recalled.

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Lodged at the Dum Dum Central Jail, Sanyal and Jangal Santhal became apprehensive that they might have to languish behind the bars for at least a year, if not more. Amid such thoughts overcasting their imagination, the announcement came for the election to West Bengal State Assembly. The election was slated for February 1967.

'Hearing the news, I jokingly told Jangal that he would soon get released as the party would surely re-nominate him from the Siliguri tribal constituency. *Jailed candidates draw more public attention and support, and the government can hardly afford to facilitate that. While you will be out in the open, I will continue to languish alone in the jail for some more time.* I had told Jangal,' Sanyal recalled.

Interestingly, the joke proved out to be true; Jangal Santhal was released from the Dum Dum Jail shortly after the CPI-M announced his candidature in the Assembly poll from the Phansidewa constituency. Now, Sanyal was left alone in the jail, staring at an uncertain future.

'But not very long after Jangal's release, one day senior leader, Niranjan Sen Gupta, came to see me in the jail. He asked me to tell the truth about my alleged connections with the Naga insurgents. In reply, I told him in clear terms that I had no links with the Naga ultras barring that I had only interacted with their leader while being

lodged at the Beherampore Jail. Apparently convinced by my statement, he said that the CPI-M was designating me as Jangal's election agent and as a result, I am likely to be released very soon,' Sanyal said.

Two days after this, Sanyal was freed from the Dum Dum Jail. On spending a night at the party commune on Karaya Road in Calcutta, Sanyal returned to Siliguri the next day.

Upon his arrival at Siliguri, senior comrade Biren Bose apprised Sanyal about Charu Mazumdar's alleged call for poll boycott. Sanyal was astonished to learn about the news, but did not take the information on face value. Instead, he decided to verify the fact from Mazumdar himself and went to Mazumdar's Mahanandapara residence the next morning.

'Charu *Da* outrightly denied having given a call for poll boycott, but the denial sounded half-hearted. I confronted him by saying that if it was so, why his close aides were telling otherwise? On this, Charu *Da* said, he would talk to those comrades.'

'*It is entirely up to you whether you want to enquire or not. But let me clarify, I am not in favour of boycotting the poll and if you decide anything contrary to this without consulting all of us, I would be the first one to defy you in public.* I had told Charu *Da* quite rudely,' Sanyal recollected.

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In the 1967 Assembly election, the ruling Congress was put to a tough challenge by two Leftist electoral fronts—the United Leftist Front (ULF) and the Peoples United Left Front (PULF).

The ULF headed by CPI-M had in it seven political parties, including the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), Socialist Unity Centre (SUC), Marxist Forward Bloc (MFB), Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI), Workers Party of India (WPI) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). The second front, PULF, led by the CPI had four parties in its fold including, the Bangla Congress, Forward Bloc (FB) and the Bolshevik Party (BP) of India.

CPI-M nominated Sourin Bose and Jangal Santhal to contest the poll from the Siliguri (General) and Phansidewa (Tribal) constituency, respectively. To ensure their victory, party comrades embarked on a massive campaign across Siliguri subdivision. Given his familiarity with the rural Terai, Sanyal mostly focused on the tea belt and the villages nearby.

On the other hand, despite Charu Mazumdar having refuted giving a poll boycott call, his follower activists led by Deepak Biswas, began creating trouble in the CPI-M's election campaign. On a number of occasions, they sneaked into CPI-M election rallies and took to shouting slogans calling for poll boycott. They also unleashed several unwarranted attacks on the election rallies of rival Congress.

'During one such poll campaign at Chathat in Phansidewa, a group of six to seven people led by Deepak Biswas attacked a Congress rally and immediately fled from the spot. Coinciding this, one of our election rallies was coming from the opposite direction and I was at the tail end of it. Even before I could apprehend what had happened that the furious Congress activists attacked us in retaliation.'

'We were totally unprepared for such a situation; many of our supporters had to bear the wrath and the rally was completely disrupted. Following the incident, I decided to call it enough and straightway went to Charu *Da*'s house. I sought an explanation for the action of his followers.'

'On the face of my strong condemnation, Charu *Da* once again denied having been issued any instruction to his supporters to disrupt the electioneering. But it became evident to me that Charu *Da* was telling us one thing and was secretly instructing something else to his coterie,' Sanyal explained.

In the run up to the 1967 election, CPI-M organised a central public meeting at Tilak Maidan in Siliguri. Noted Communist leader, Ronen Sen, was the key speaker. According to Sanyal, that was the biggest-ever political rally held in Siliguri.

'Party supporters from across Siliguri subdivision had converged at the venue. While scores of them arrived on foot, thousands from the town's outskirts were transported in 36 buses and trucks. That was a record in itself,' Sanyal recalled.

Yet, in that election, the CPI-M candidates lost both in the Siliguri (General) and the Phansidewa (Tribal) constituencies. In Phansidewa seat, Jangal Santhal got defeated to his Congress rival by 5,743 votes; in Siliguri, Sourin Bose lost by 7,787 votes.

'We had massive public support with us, but were lacking in the election machinery that could translate it into votes,' Sanyal observed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Although the CPI-M lost the two Assembly seats in Siliguri subdivision to Congress, the overall results of the 1967 West Bengal Assembly poll went in favour of the Leftists. Out of the 280 seats for which polling was held, against the Congress tally of 127, the CPI-M-led ULF won in 68 seats and the CPI-led PULF stood victorious in 65.

Subsequently, ULF and PULF merged to form a post-electoral alliance named the United Front (UF) and formed the government in Bengal. Ajoy Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress became the Chief Minister.

In view of this development, instead of lamenting the electoral loss in Siliguri, the CPI-M workers in Terai spontaneously plunged into a celebration. They were beaming with enthusiasm.

'This was more so because despite being centred on the election, the focus of our campaign in Terai was less about capturing the legislative power and more about occupying the ceiling-surplus farmland. There was also the agenda to establish a two-third harvest sharing formula all across the region.'

'Hence even after losing the election, the party cadres and supporters in Terai did not lose the momentum. On the contrary, they

renewed the pledge to achieve the goal through a continuous struggle. This time round, there was a heightened expectation from the state government as the CPI-M was now a crucial partner in the ruling coalition,' Sanyal pointed out.

Led by the *Krishak Sabha* activists, small farmers and sharecroppers in Siliguri subdivision started to capture the ceiling-surplus land by force. Depriving the landlords, the sharecroppers also took to reaping the entire harvest. This antagonised the landlord gentry and they resorted to retaliatory actions.

Subsequent to this, on 18 March 1967, the *Krishak Sabha* held an open convention at Rambola Jote village near Naxalbari. From there, a call was given for an all-out armed offensive against the landlords. The immediate target was to install the *Krishak Sabha* as the supreme authority in Terai; snatch all ceiling-surplus land from the control of the landlords; and redistribute such plots among the farmers on the broad principle of *Land to the tillers.*

Armed rallies and public meetings became a daily routine. The situation turned so volatile that alarmed landlords made desperate appeals to the police and the administration asking for an immediate intervention. But the CPI-M being a part of the state's ruling UF government, the local administration found itself in dilemma on whether to employ some suppressive measures or not.

Prominent CPI-M leader, Jyoti Basu was West Bengal's deputy Chief Minister then and he was in favour of restraint on the part of the police and the administration.

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'Initially, the administration took a lenient view of the Naxalbari agitation for obvious political reasons. This allowed the Communist agitation in Terai to grow by the day,' observed Haridas Bagchi, who was posted in Darjeeling as the District Intelligence Officer-I between 1962 and 1967.[1]

Amidst an ever-intensifying agitation, the management of Sanyashisthan Tea Estate near Bagdogra expelled 40-odd permanent workers

[1] Haridas Bagchi, who was the District Intelligence Officer-I of Darjeeling during the Naxalbari uprising, is the cousin of Kanu Sanyal's mother Nirmala Devi. He now lives in Kolkata and was interviewed in Siliguri in 2009.

for joining the Communist trade union. Despite repeated appeals, the management refused to reinstate the workers, literally pushing them on the verge of starvation.

'The owner of the tea estate, Robi Mitra, was known to me. As the impasse continued, I went to him one day and urged him to reinstate the expelled workers. But instead of conceding my request, Mitra threatened to set lose his Alsatian on me. I made a retreat, challenging him to repeat the same threat outside the safe enclosures of his estate. Consequent to this, I issued a call for reaping the harvest of all farmlands that were under the occupancy of Sanyashisthan Tea Estate,' Sanyal said.

Krishak Sabha activists implemented the call in true letter and spirit. Over 4,000 workers-peasants gathered at Sanyashisthan Tea Estate on a given day and harvested the entire paddy of a huge tract of land. They also demolished 20-odd hutments that the plantation management had constructed on the adjacent vest land and to mark the victory, put up the Communist red flag on the plot.

Panicked at the turn of events, the tea estate owner summoned the police. The police came rushing, but taking on the huge assemblage was surely beyond their capacity.

'Most aggressive in our gathering were the ladies; they pushed back the policemen to the main road. Yet the police did not dare to retaliate, as behind the ladies were the male activists armed with bows and arrows. Resorting to any oppressive means against the women would have invited a violent reaction that the police were not prepared to withstand,' Sanyal explained.

The police finally backed out, but the incident threw up a new area of concern for the revolutionary Communists. Sanyal and other leaders envisaged that given the course of the agitation, there would be many more such confrontations with the police and not on every occasion the armed cops would retreat. Hence, it now became pertinent that all the activists got systematic training in operating traditional arms and weapons.

Following this, those expert in operating arms soon started conducting regular practice sessions for the ground label cadres across Terai. They also started procuring more and more bows and arrows, spears and other traditional arms-weapons.

With the *Krishak Sabha* agitation gaining momentum by every passing day, majority of the big landlords fled with their family members

from the villages in and around Naxalbari. They relocated to Siliguri town and to other adjacent areas deemed safe for them. On the other hand, the relatively smaller landlords surrendered before the Communist activists and handed over their firearms.

In all practical sense, the situation reached such a point that none from outside—be it the landlord gentry or the police, had the guts to step into any of the Terai villages. The revolutionary Communists were running their writ over the entire region. On many occasions, the activists also held 'kangaroo courts' to punish thieves and other petty criminals.

'In April 1967, one such open court was convened at Choupukhuria locality to try two rustlers. The rustlers were caught red-handed by the villagers. Along with other comrades, I was also present during the trial; following a brief hearing into matter, local comrades pronounced death sentence to the duo and the sentence was executed that very day,' Khokhon Mazumdar, a leading agitator from the 1967 Naxalbari uprising wrote in his memoir published in 2004.[2]

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Unable to let loose the police force due to political constraints, the mainstream CPI-M leaders instead unleashed a massive political campaign against the agitation in Terai. The main allegation that the CPI-M leadership levelled against the Naxalbari rebels was that in the name of snatching ceiling-surplus land from big landlords, the agitators were capturing the holdings of small farmers. The marginalised farmers were also being subjected to severe atrocities, they alleged.

'The real scenario was, however, entirely different. When the big landlords realised that retaining occupancy over the ceiling-surplus land was not possible any longer, they began to sell off such plots to individuals at a throwaway price. By doing so, they cunningly pitched the new owners against us and the CPI-M leadership started publicising this as atrocities on marginalised farmers.'

'To counter this massive misinformation campaign, we convened an assemblage of small landlords at Burraganj village. Around 150 landlords

[2] Khokhon Majumder's memoir in Bengali, *Naxalbari: Bharater Buke Basantaer Bajranirghosh*, published in 2004.

turned up at the meeting and pledged solidarity with us; they denied in writing of being subjected to any sort of atrocity by the *Krishak Sabha*. In that meeting, the landowners also handed over us 23 guns and some cartridges; around ₹30,000 in cash came as spontaneous donation.'

'Jangal immediately forwarded the landlords' written undertaking to Charu *Da* along with a supplementary statement. Charu *Da* was requested to get it published in the form of a pamphlet and arrange for its distribution amongst the general public. This document could have proved a major tool in countering the CPI-M's misinformation campaign, but for whatever reason, Charu *Da* did not attach any importance to that, leave aside publishing a pamphlet for public dissemination,' recalled Sanyal.

Meanwhile, with the 23 guns passed on by the landlords, *Krishak Sabha* cadres embarked on a training programme in operating firearms. The training was meant only for the leading activists, including Sanyal.

The agitation was gradually spiralling out of Terai and the reverberations could now be felt in the surrounding areas, including the Darjeeling hills. In the hills, workers of Mundakhoti, College Valley, Selimboong and Chungthung tea estates forcibly occupied the unused land in their respective tea plantations.

This being the growing trend, the police-administration sniffed a real danger in the offing. As a result, the police were now gradually hardening their stance towards the Communist rebels and began to monitor the movements of leading activists such as Sanyal, Sourin Bose, Jangal Santhal, Keshav Sarkar and a few others.

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Notwithstanding the volatile situation, a handful of big landlords remained firm on their confrontational approach towards the *Krishak Sabha*. Among them were land shark Nagen Roy Choudhury who opened fire on a sharecropper when the latter was reaping a harvest. Following the incident, fellow peasants nabbed the landlord and an open trial was organised for him at Burraganj village.

'In the open trial, we asked the landlord to confess his crimes and pledge not to wield arms against a farmer ever again. But surprisingly, even being surrounded by over a thousand *Krishak Sabha* cadres, the

land shark refused to bow down; rather putting up a direct challenge, he thundered, if need be arises, he would not hesitate shooting down a few more "errant" farmers. The moment he finished his statement, the *Krishak Sabha* activists jumped over him; he was lynched on the spot,' Sanyal said.

That was the first-ever instance of any landlord being killed by the Naxalbari agitators. The incident made it to next day's newspapers in a big way and completely smashed the landlord gentry's morale. The few of them who were until then clinging onto their properties at Kharibari and other areas in Terai, fled to the landlord-stronghold of Chathat.

They chose Chathat as their safe haven considering the Communists' lack of a remarkable support base among the local populace. This was because the Communist activists at Chathat were toeing the Charu Mazumdar line, bereft of mass organisations.

Finding the situation going out of control, the administration increased the police deployment by manifolds all across Terai. They also got arrest warrants issued against all the leading agitators; Kanu Sanyal being at the helm of affairs of the Naxalbari agitation, his name featured on top of the list.

To take stock of the ground realities, the state land and land revenue minister, Harekrishna Konar of the CPI-M, came down to Siliguri on 16 May 1967. Konar was then also the general secretary of the state *Krishak Sabha*. During the visit to Naxalbari, he held separate meetings with land department officials, the landlords and also with *Krishak Sabha* activists.

'After the initial talks at Naxalbari, Konar asked me to meet him again next day at the Sukna forest rest-house near Siliguri. Consulting Charu *Da* on this at his Siliguri house, Sourin Bose and I reached Sukna in the evening of 17 May on a government jeep. But on stepping into the forest rest-house, we were completely surprised by the presence of the DIG Jalpaiguri range, the superintendent of police Darjeeling and several other senior police officials.'

'Our meeting started in the presence of the officials. Konar told us that the police would give us a list of accused activists and if at least some of the accused persons surrendered, the state government would withdraw all the cases later. But immediately after the formal meeting, on the pretext of a casual talk, he took me to a secluded corner

and said that none of the activists should surrender unless and until he had sent a secret communiqué from Calcutta.'

'Seizing the opportunity, I explained to him that we were only capturing the ceiling-surplus land as provided for in the law and that we have plans to redistribute those plots amongst landless peasants. On this, Konar promised that the CPI-M Provincial Committee would soon invite me and Sourin Bose to Calcutta for an elaborate discussion on the issue. But in reality, neither the invitation nor the secret letter ever came,' Sanyal pointed out.

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Immediately after Konar's leaving Siliguri, police launched a massive operation against the Naxalbari agitators. In the words of the then District Intelligence Officer of Darjeeling, Haridas Bagchi: 'Following the lynching of landlord Nagen Roy Choudhury, the district administration had decided to call it enough. The state home department also gave the much-needed go ahead for an all-out offensive.'

'To crush the menace with an iron hand, the district superintendent of police, Arun Prashad Mukhopadhyay, asked me to find out competent officers for deployment in the Bagdogra–Naxalbari area. After going through the track records of several officers, Sonam Wangdi, an inspector posted at Darjeeling Sadar police station was deemed fit for the job. He was immediately transferred to Bagdogra police investigation centre. Wangdi was a firm and sincere police officer; he soon plunged into action with utmost determination,' Bagchi added.[3]

The same time round, the administration set up several temporary police camps in the tea estates of Terai including one at Bijay Nagar near Hatighisha area of Naxalbari.

In a counter move, the agitators 'barred' the entry of police personnel into the villages. To justify the move, they invoked the CPI-M-backed state government's initial announcement that the police would not meddle into any dispute between the peasants and the landlord gentry. Equipped with both firearms and traditional weapons, the agitators put in place a round-the-clock vigil around the villages. This was to foil any invasion by the police.

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[3] Interview with Haridas Bagchi in Siliguri in 2009.

The cops, on the other hand, were determined to quell the movement and were looking for an opportune moment to foray into the hamlets.

Early on 24 May 1967, the police got a tip off that Sanyal and the other leading Communist rebels were camping at Borojhoru Jote village at Hatighisha. In a bid to arrest them, police inspector Sonam Wangdi forayed into the village leading a small team of policemen.

The news of the police raid instantly spread across the villages and armed Communist cadres—males and females alike, began converging at Borojhoru Jote village from all sides.

'In reality, I was not there at Borojhoru Jote village that day; I was busy conducting a group meeting at some other locality. But acting on the wrong tip off and again underestimating the ground realities, the police team straightway walked into the village. Only one or two of them were carrying firearms.'

'Now, with hundreds of bow and arrow-wielding activists encircling the village, the cops found themselves trapped in a situation with no escape. The policemen soon started to beg for mercy, but the agitated mob was not in a mood to relent. They unleashed an attack on the cops and in the process struck inspector Sonam Wangdi with an arrow. He died on the spot,' recalled Sanyal.

The killing of Sonam Wangdi jolted the administration hard. The police in particular were outraged by the death of their fellow cop and were desperate for a revenge. From the afternoon of 24 May itself, the administration began mobilising additional police force from Siliguri to Naxalbari.

With reinforcement in place, the police once again raided Borojhoru Jote village in the evening and reigned terror for hours together. They vandalised several hutments, set the stored paddy on fire and arrested whosoever they found in the village.

Anticipating similar police offensive in other villages, the agitators too began to mobilise their strength. They put up vigilant groups at the entry points to each and every village at Naxalbari, placing slogan-mongering ladies at the forefront.

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On the morning of next day, 25 May, once such vigilant group was guarding the entry to Prashadu Jote village, located barely a kilometre

off Naxalbari market. Comprising of some 200-odd ladies and a handful of male activists, the group was camping beside a primary school at Prashadu Jote; some of the female activists had brought along their children. Local *Krishak Sabha* leader, Prahallad Singh, was in-charge of the assembly.

'Prahallad Singh was briefing the female activists about the ways to face a police offensive that a police jeep rolled into the spot with some six or seven armed cops inside. At this, the ladies instantly swung into action; they encircled the jeep and started shouting anti-police slogans. A few of them also tried snatching the firearms from the police.'

'Trapped from all sides, an officer who was in civil attires and was seated on the front seat of the vehicle pleaded Prahallad to let them go. The officer told that they had come only to find out what the gathering was up to and the cops do not have any plans to cause harm. Prahallad got convinced by the seemingly innocuous statement and instructed the female activists to allow the police team go. But that was the fatal mistake he made.'

'Driving out of the confinement, the police jeep stopped at barely 25 metre distance; the officer in civil attire now ordered the policemen to open fire at the gathering. Within moments, the police rifles barked, killing 11 persons on the spot. Among them were eight females, an adult male and two children,' Sanyal recalled.

At the time of the massacre, Sanyal was holding a meeting at Kharibari block located on the farthest corner of Siliguri subdivision.

'I reached the spot only in the evening and heard the entire episode from local comrades. Later, I could identify that the officer who gave police the shooting order was none other than the Siliguri SDO, Dipak Kumar Ghosh,' he said.

The 11 agitators killed in the 25 May police massacre were: (1) Dhaneswari Devi, (2) Sheemaswari Mallick, (3) Nayaneswari Mallick, (4) Sorubala Burman, (5) Sonamati Singh, (6) Fulmati Devi, (7) Samsari Saibani, (8) Gaudrau Saibani and (9) Kharsingh Mallick—who was the only male victim. The names of two children who succumbed to the police bullets remained unknown.

At the site of the 1967 Prashadu Jote police massacre, now stands a martyrs tomb, inscribed with the names of the victims.

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The 25 May massacre worked like a spark, igniting revolutionary flames all across West Bengal. Following in the footsteps of the Naxalbari agitators, peasants and workers in the 24 Parganas district in southern Bengal launched a similar movement occupying ceiling-surplus land from the clutches of the landlords.

Also for the first time, a few post-graduate students from the North Bengal University in Siliguri joined the Naxalbari agitation. Together with *Krishak Sabha* cadres, they looted the entire harvest from landlord Narsingh Giri's warehouse located on the north of Shivmandir area at Matigara.

In urban areas too, people resorted to spontaneous agitations in support of the Naxalbari Movement. In the state capital Calcutta surfaced a new body christened as the *Naxalbari Krishak Sangram Sahayak Samity* or the Naxalbari Peasant Movement Support Committee. The organisation was floated mainly by disgruntled CPI-M workers and supporters who had got fed up with the party leadership because of their growing affinity for electoral politics. Significantly, the number of student and young Communists in the organ was very high.

The revolutionary flames of West Bengal did not take much time to spread onto Kerala, the other Communist bastion located in southern India.

Meanwhile, at the ground zero at Naxalbari, the face-off between the police and the agitators intensified further. The conflict now attained the shape of guerilla warfare; activists such as Sanyal, Jangal Santhal, Keshav Sarkar, Panchanan Sarkar, Khokhon Mazumdar and others were leading the battle from underground.

Failing to contain the rebellion, the state government rushed in the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The local administration issued shoot at sight orders against the rebels. In many areas, the rebels and the state forces came face to face, resulting in casualties on both sides.

'As compared to the highly organised state forces, our strength in terms of arms and ammunitions was negligible. The state forces were equipped with sophisticated firearms including self-loading rifles; we only had some 29 primitive guns primarily used to scare away wild animals such as monkey, elephant, etc. Moreover, within a few days of the arrival of CRPF, we started running out of ammunitions.'

'To come out of the crisis, I sent in a secrete message to Charu *Da* asking him to immediately arrange for some ammunitions. Since the rifles we possessed were licensed ones availed from the landlords, I sent along the necessary papers so that the ammunitions could be procured from the authorised dealers in Jalpaiguri. But for reasons beyond my knowledge, Charu *Da* did not or could not meet the requirement,' Sanyal pointed out.

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With the armed conflict between state forces and the rebels getting prolonged, all major newspapers in India began to publish the day-to-day developments of Naxalbari uprising with much prominence. As a result, revolutionary Communists all across India were growing eager to know more about the struggle. Many were even getting impatient to participate in the agitation.

'During the entire period, while I and other leaders who were active on the field had gone underground, Charu *Da* was bedridden at his Siliguri house. Owing to this, to the outer world, Charu *Da* was the only accessible link to the Naxalbari uprising.'

'Exploiting this opportunity, Charu *Da* began propagating his own strategy about forming small combat groups and annihilating the class enemies. He wrongly projected this as the true spirit of Naxalbari Movement and for obvious reasons, this got widely publicised in the news media.'

'As a result of this misinformation campaign, comrades from other states such as Assam, Bihar, UP, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Jammu and Kashmir were getting sworn into Charu *Da*'s strategy of individual annihilation,' recalled Sanyal.

The consequence was devastating. Across the urban hubs of West Bengal such as Siliguri, Calcutta, Asansol, Burdwan and Durgapur, small armed-groups of young Communists began targeting the police and other high officials in the government. They also attacked rival political leaders and individuals opposed to the Naxalbari agitation.

Lobbing grenades and bombing public places became a routine affair. Moreover, toeing Charu Mazumdar's views that 'bourgeois education has no real utility' and rather it was a 'hindrance on the path of revolution', the young rebels started setting textbooks and

educational institutions on fire. They disrupted examinations at several places.

Adding fuel to the raging fire, Charu Mazumdar now coined a new slogan—'*Chiner Chairman Aamader Chairman*,' China's Chairman Is Our Chairman. This was to express allegiance to the Chinese Communist leader, Mao Tse-tung, and instate him as the undisputed leader of all Communist revolutionaries across the world.

There was hardly any wall left in West Bengal where the slogan did not make it to as graffiti. It became a stimulating mantra for the urban revolutionaries.

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Around that time, the Communist Party of China (CPC) openly came out praising the Naxalbari uprising. On 5 July 1967, the CPC mouthpiece, *People's Daily*, published an editorial about the Naxalbari Movement, under the headline *The Spring Thunder over India*.

In that editorial, CPC condemned both the CPI and the CPI-M for walking along the path of 'Soviet revisionism'. It accused them of deviating from the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The article showered praises on the Naxalbari peasantry for rising in revolt against the 'reactionary forces' and patted the agitators saying that they have shown India the real path to liberation.

> A peal of spring thunder has crashed over the land of India. Revolutionary peasants in the Darjeeling area have risen in rebellion. Under the leadership of a revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party, a red area of rural revolutionary armed struggle has been established in India. This is a development of tremendous significance for the Indian people's revolutionary struggle.
>
> In the past few months, the peasant masses in this area, led by the revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party, have thrown off the shackles of modern revisionism and smashed the trammels that bound them. They have seized grain, land and weapons from the landlords and plantation owners, punished the local tyrants and wicked gentry, and ambushed the reactionary troops and police that went to suppress them thus demonstrating the enormous might of the peasants' revolutionary armed struggle. All imperialists, revisionists, corrupt officials, local tyrants and wicked gentry, and reactionary

army and police are nothing in the eyes of the revolutionary peasants who are determined to strike them down to the dust. The absolutely correct thing has been done by the revolutionary group of the Indian Communist Party and they have done it well. The Chinese people joyfully applaud this revolutionary storm of the Indian peasants in the Darjeeling area as do all Marxist-Leninists and revolutionary people of the whole world.

It is an inevitability that the Indian peasants will rebel and the Indian people will make revolution because the reactionary Congress rule has left them with no alternative. India under Congress rule is only nominally independent; in fact, it is nothing more than a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country. The Congress administration represents the interests of the Indian feudal princes, big landlords and bureaucrat-comprador capitalists. Internally, it oppresses the Indian people without any mercy and suck their blood, while internationally it serves the new boss, U.S. imperialism, and its number one accomplice, the Soviet revisionist ruling clique, in addition to its old suzerain British Imperialism, thus selling out the national interests of India in a big way. So imperialism, Soviet revisionism, feudalism and bureaucrat-comprador capitalism weigh like big mountains on the backs of the Indian people, especially on the toiling masses of workers and peasants.

The Congress administration has intensified its suppression and exploitation of the Indian people and pursued a policy of national betrayal during the past few years. Famine has stalked the land year after year. The fields are strewn with the bodies of those who have died of hunger and starvation. The Indian people, above all, the Indian peasants, have found life impossible for them. The revolutionary peasants in the Darjeeling area have now risen in rebellion, in violent revolution. This is the prelude to a violent revolution by the hundreds of millions of people throughout India. The Indian people will certainly cast away these big mountains off their backs and win complete emancipation. This is the general trend of Indian history which no force on earth can check or hinder.

What road is to be followed by the Indian revolution? This is a fundamental question affecting the success of the Indian revolution and the destiny of the 500 million Indian people. The Indian revolution must take the road of relying on the peasants, establishing base areas in the countryside, persisting in protracted armed struggle and using the countryside to encircle and finally capture the cities. This is Mao Tse-tung's road, the road that has led the Chinese revolution to

victory, and the only road to victory for the revolutions of all oppressed nations and peoples.

Our great leader, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, pointed out as long as 40 years ago: 'In China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local tyrants and evil gentry into their graves.'

Chairman Mao explicitly pointed out long ago that the peasant question occupies an extremely important place in the people's revolution. The peasants constitute the main force in the national-democratic revolution against imperialism and its lackeys; they are most reliable and numerous allies of the proletariat. India is a vast semi-colonial and semi-feudal country with a population of 500 million, the absolute majority of which, the peasantry, once aroused, will become the invincible force of the Indian revolution. By integrating itself with peasants, the Indian proletariat will be able to bring about earth-shaking changes in the vast countryside of India and defeat any powerful enemy in a soul-stirring people's war.

Our great leader, Chairman Mao, teaches us: 'The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution. This Marxist-Leninist principle of revolution holds good universally, for China and for all other countries.'

The specific nature of the Indian revolution, like that of the Chinese revolution, is armed revolution fighting against armed counter-revolution; *Armed* struggle is the only correct road for the Indian revolution; there is no other road whatsoever. Such trash as 'Gandhi-ism', 'parliamentary road' and the like are opium used by the Indian ruling classes to paralyse the Indian people. Only by relying on violent revolution and taking the road of armed struggle can India be saved and the Indian people achieve complete liberation. Specifically, this is to arouse the peasant masses boldly, build up and expand the revolutionary armed forces, deal blows at the armed suppression of the imperialists and reactionaries, who are temporarily stronger than the revolutionary forces, by using the whole set of the flexible strategy and tactics of people's war personally worked out by Chairman Mao, and to persist in protracted armed struggle and seize victory of the revolution step by step.

In the light of the characteristics of the Chinese revolution, our great leader, Chairman Mao, has pointed out the importance of establishing revolutionary rural base areas. Chairman Mao teaches us: In order to persist in protracted armed struggle and defeat imperialism and its lackeys, 'it is imperative for the revolutionary ranks to turn the backward villages into advanced, consolidated base areas, into great military, political, economic and cultural bastions of the revolution from which to fight their vicious enemies who are using the cities for attacks on the rural districts, and in this way gradually to achieve the complete victory of the revolution through protracted fighting.'

India is country with vast territory; its countryside, where the reactionary rule is weak, provides the broad areas in which the revolutionaries can manoeuvre freely. So long as the Indian proletarian revolutionaries adhere to the revolutionary line of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tse-tung's Thought and rely on their great ally, the peasants, it is entirely possible for them to establish one advanced revolutionary rural base area after another in the broad backward rural areas and build a people's army of a new type. Whatever difficulties and twists and turns the Indian revolutionaries may experience in the course of building such revolutionary base areas, they will eventually develop such areas from isolated points into a vast expanse, from small areas into extensive ones, an expansion in a series of waves. Thus, a situation in which the cities are encircled from the countryside will gradually be brought about in the Indian revolution to pave the way for the final seizure of towns and cities and winning nation-wide victory.

The Indian reactionaries are panic-stricken by the development of the rural armed struggle in Darjeeling. They have sensed imminent disaster and they wail in alarm that the peasants' revolt in Darjeeling will 'become a national disaster.' Imperialism and the Indian reactionaries are trying in a thousand and one ways to suppress this armed struggle of the Darjeeling peasants and nip it in the bud. The Dange renegade clique and revisionist chieftains of the Indian Communist Party are vigorously slandering and attacking the revolutionaries in the Indian Communist Party and the revolutionary peasants in Darjeeling for their great exploits. The so-called 'non-Congress' government in West Bengal openly sides with the reactionary Indian Government in its bloody suppression of the revolutionary peasants in Darjeeling. This gives added proof that these renegades and revisionists are running dogs of U.S. imperialism and Soviet revisionism and lackeys of the big

Indian landlords and bourgeoisie. What they call the 'Non-Congress government' is only a tool of the landlords and bourgeoisie.

But no matter how well the imperialists, Indian reactionaries and the modern revisionists may cooperate in their sabotage and suppression, the torch of armed struggle lighted by the revolutionaries in the Indian Communist Party and the revolutionary peasants in Darjeeling will not be put out. 'A single spark can start a prairie fire.' The spark in Darjeeling will start a prairie fire and will certainly set the vast expanses of India ablaze. That a great storm of revolutionary armed struggle will eventually sweep across the length and breadth of India is certain. Although the course of the Indian revolutionary struggle will be long and tortuous, the Indian revolution, guided by great Marxism-Leninism, Mao Tse-tung's Thought, will surely triumph,' the complete editorial of the *People's Daily* read.

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Peking Radio too began reporting the day-to-day development taking place at Naxalbari, constantly perking up the morale of the revolutionaries back in India.

'It was not quite clear to me whether the *People's Daily* editorial and *Peking Radio* bulletins were the outcome of some communication initiated by someone from amongst us. To my mind, probably, the Chinese party learnt about the Naxalbari uprising from the news feeds provided by the Press Trust of India (PTI),' said Sanyal.

Subsequent to the stimulus from China, on one hand scores of educated urban youths across West Bengal plunged into revolutionary activities and on the other, the CPI-M central leadership came under the direct line of fire from the ground-level party workers. The leadership from some states too joined in the bandwagon.

The revolt gradually came out in the open mainly in Assam, Bihar and Jammu and Kashmir, prompting the CPI-M leadership to unilaterally dissolve several local and even state committees of the party. The Darjeeling district committee was on top of the list.

Taking advantage of the anarchic activities in urban Bengal that were being carried out in the name of Naxalbari agitation, the CPI-M leadership intensified their virulent campaign against the revolutionaries. Couched in state power, they also adopted some tactics to dent the Naxalbari Movement from within.

'Amid the continuous strife with state forces, monsoon was already at door making the peasant-activists worried by the day. In each and every village across Terai, farmers started approaching us to facilitate them the opportunity to cultivate their land. *If we don't till, what will we eat in the days to come?* They asked.'

'Exploiting the situation, CPI-M ministers in the West Bengal government issued an open appeal asking the agitating farmers to surrender before the police; they assured the farmers an instant bail so that they could take to cultivation at once. In several villages, the farmers fell for the trap and the agitation gradually went on the waning,' Sanyal pointed out.

With an increased number of police and paramilitary presence at Naxalbari and a corresponding decline in the rebel strengths, the revolutionaries now began to face a hard time. They were running short of safe hideouts and necessary logistics, including food.

Seizing this opportunity, the state forces came down heavily on the Communist revolutionaries; the hitherto cornered landlord gentry regained strength and returned to their bases at Naxalbari. Now the state forces and the landlord gentry unleashed a two-pronged attack. They began to pick, choose and kill the Communist rebels in one village after another.

The situation came to such a stage that the leading revolutionaries could no longer afford the risk of hiding in the villages; they were compelled to shift their base to nearby forests.

'That was the first time that we had to spend a whole day and night deep inside the *Dalka* forest. There were 11 of us in the dense jungle, without food and water; we were exhausted of running from one village to the other.'

'Hiding inside the dense woods, we were not only apprehensive of a police foray, but were also risking the attacks by wild animals, especially elephants. In the event of an actual face-off with any of the two, we were equipped with nothing but empty rifles.'

'On the second day of the hiding, I managed sending an SOS message to Charu *Da* in Siliguri. Describing him the ground situation and our exhausted condition, I requested him to send a vehicle near Kesthopore Tea Estate. The vehicle must reach by afternoon, I wrote, so that we could travel to a safe place away from Naxalbari,' Sanyal recalled.

This time Charu Mazumdar did not fail Sanyal. Despite his ill health, Mazumdar personally arrived in disguise on a jeep at the given spot. Deceiving the continuous police and paramilitary patrol, he then transported Sanyal and others to Sonapur village located on the border of Darjeeling and the then West Dinajpur district.

The village was located beside National Highway 31 to Calcutta. From there, the exhausted Naxalbari rebels walked their way to nearby Daspara village in West Dinajpur and found shelter in the house of a local Communist activist.

'Reaching there, the first thing we asked for was *Bhat*, plate full of steamed rice; none of us had eaten anything in the past 35 hours. We were dying of hunger.

Our host comrade cooked about 10-kg rice in a huge vessel and dished out the same only with boiled garlic and green chilli. One might not believe, but the moment we were served the steamed rice, we forgot everything else; we literally plunged over it. It took us only a few minutes to finish the huge volume of rice. That was when I realised what hunger is,' Sanyal recalled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

On spending a few days at Daspara village, Sanyal and 10 of his associate comrades relocated again. This time they moved closer to Siliguri, to a farmhouse at Bidhannagar in Phansidewa block. The farmhouse was owned by a party sympathiser, Madhav Dey.

Here from, barring four comrades including him, Sanyal relinquished the remaining activists; he asked them to return to their native villages and take rest. The quartet that stayed back comprised Sanyal, Khokhon Mazumdar, Khudan Mallick and Deepak Biswas.

'It was the first week of September 1967. After waging a prolonged and exhausting strife since May, we got a chance for the first time to relax and recuperate. Our host, Madhav Dey provided us the best possible amenities, including two mosquito nets to keep at bay the deadly mosquitoes at night.'

'To evade unwanted curiosity of outsiders, during daytime we used to hide amidst a betel cultivation inside the farmhouse and come out only after dusk. Through the evening, we would ponder about our next course of action and the way forward for the Naxalbari Movement. It was during one such discussion that I proposed a trip to

China and the other comrades nodded readily. The trip was mooted to avail the Chinese Communist Party's advice on the ways to carry forward the Naxalbari struggle; seeking military aid was never on our mind,' Sanyal recalled.

A few months before this, at the instruction of Charu Mazumdar, his loyalist Krishna Bhakta Sharma of Kalimpong had alone embarked on a voyage to China. But there was neither any confirmation if Sharma had been able to reach China nor was there any news about his whereabouts.

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The four-member team led by Sanyal decided to undertake the journey to China with the help of the Chinese Embassy in Dhaka, the capital of the then East Pakistan. Sanyal got in touch with Bacha Munshi—a CPI-M leader from Chopra in the then West Dinajpur district, who going against the party's official stand used to sympathise with the Naxalbari Movement.

'Munshi was a diehard Communist right from the days of the 1946 *Tebhaga* movement. Post-Independence, though all his siblings stayed back in East Pakistan, he chose to settle down in India. On being approached, Munshi readily agreed to guide us up to Dhaka with the help from his brothers based on the other side of the border. After getting the green signal, we moved to Munshi's house in West Dinajpur located near India's border with East Pakistan,' Sanyal pointed out.

They spent three days at Munshi's house waiting for a suitable day to cross over to the other side. Finally on the fourth day dawn, accompanied by the CPI-M leader, they crossed over to East Pakistan. For this, they first had to wade through the knee-deep waters of Mahananada River that bifurcates India and Pakistan in that area; next came a long walk for miles through the whole day.

'To evade unwarranted attention from any quarters, we were clad in *lungi* and white *panjabi*—the common male attire in East Pakistan. We continued walking for several hours and finally in the evening, arrived at the house of Bacha Munshi's brother at Panchagarh police station area in East Dinajpur district,' recalled Sanyal.

Munshi's brother accorded them a warm welcome. They were offered the best possible hospitality for the next few days, but he was hesitant to take the risk of transporting the Naxalbari rebels to Dhaka.

This made Sanyal and his fellow comrades to shelve the plan of visiting China via Dhaka; they returned to the CPI-M leader's house at Daspara in West Dinajpur. Halting there for a night, the Naxalbari quartet bid adieu to their CPI-M friend the next morning and returned to the Bidhannagar farmhouse of sympathiser Madhav Dey. They now started weighing alternative plans for visiting China.

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From their hideout at the Bidhannagar farmhouse, Sanyal sent a message to Charu Mazumdar in Siliguri requesting him to come over for an urgent discussion. Obliging them, an ailing Mazumdar arrived at the farmhouse on the scheduled day evening.

Sanyal briefed him about the trip to China that they were contemplating. He also narrated Mazumdar about their failed attempt to proceed through East Pakistan, adding that they were now planning to proceed via Nepal. On hearing about their plans, Mazumdar was visibly exited; he readily gave his assent for the China voyage.

A few days from this, Sanyal, Khokhon Mazumdar, Khudan Mallick and Deepak Biswas set out from Bidhannagar for China. The quartet reached Kishanganj town in Bihar by bus; from there, they boarded a night train to Raxaul station located on the Nepal border. They reached Raxaul on the next day evening and found accommodation in a budget hotel in this Bihar business town.

'We were not carrying any luggage or anything else, apart from the ₹5,000 Indian currency notes. Yet on the next dawn while crossing over to Nepal through Raxaul Pass, we were extremely nervous of being caught by the security personnel. Thankfully nothing of that sort happened and we soon landed up in Birganj, a town in Nepal bordering India,' Sanyal said.

Without wasting a moment in Birganj, the Naxalbari rebels boarded a Kathmandu-bound bus. By early in the afternoon, they reached the temple city, which is also the capital of Nepal.

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On reaching Kathmandu, they began knocking on one hotel after another looking for a budget accommodation. But Kathmandu being a popular tourist destination, the tariff was quite high in almost every hotel.

As Sanyal and his comrades continued with their quest for a budget accommodation, a hotel owner angrily advised them to go to some *Dharmasala*, a charitable low-cost community accommodation facility run by religious groups or migrant linguistic communities.

'Instead of losing our cool at this suggestion, we requested the hotel owner to provide us the address of some *Dharmasala*. Thankfully this time round, the hotel owner did not get angry and obliged our request. By late in the afternoon, we landed up at a decent Marwari *Dharmasala* located centrally in Kathmandu. What delighted us most was the unexpectedly low tariff: ₹4 per head per day and that too inclusive of food,' Sanyal pointed out.

For the next two days, barring Sanyal, the rest three Naxalbari rebels roamed about in Kathmandu visiting many of the popular tourist spots located in and around the city. On the third day, the entire team went to the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu, but only to be turned back without being entertained.

'The security guards did not even allow us an entry into the Embassy on the pretext that the Ambassador was not in office. We had never expected such a rude treatment at the Embassy of Communist China. This left us very depressed. We went to the Embassy again the next day; this time, the guards granted us an entry. We introduced ourselves to a senior official and expressed our desire to meet the Ambassador.'

'Though the Ambassador was in office, the staff we were interacting with did not grant us an immediate audience. Instead, jotting down our trivia, he asked us to come again the next day,' Sanyal explained.

The next day, only Sanyal and Deepak Biswas went to the Embassy; the rest two comrades stayed back at the *Dharmasala*. The Embassy staff accorded them a warm welcome and immediately took them to the Ambassador.

'Perhaps, by then, the Embassy had enquired about us from their Intelligence sources. The attitude of the Ambassador towards us was overwhelmingly congenial; he offered us tea and snacks and asked if we needed money. Expressing our gratitude, we told that we had not come for monetary aid; rather, we wish to visit China to meet Chairman Mao. On this, the Ambassador replied that he would have to seek permission from Peking before making a commitment,' Sanyal continued.

Sanyal and Deepak Biswas returned to the *Dharmasala* and spent the whole night in sheer anxiety. The situation was as if they were awaiting the results for some examination that they had appeared for; they could not even imagine being denied a trip to Communist China, this would crush all their revolutionary zeal to dust.

To their delight, on the fourth visit to the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu, the Ambassador informed that Peking has welcomed them to the Communist Republic. The Ambassador also asked the Naxalbari revolutionaries to check out from the *Dharmasala*—where they had been putting up for almost a week, and shift to the Embassy the very next dawn.

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When the four of them—Sanyal, Khokhon Mazumdar, Khudan Mallick and Deepak Biswas—stepped out of the *Dharmasala*, the veil of dusk was yet to take leave making way for a new dawn. Cautiously, they moved through the brick-laid uneven streets of Kathmandu; they looked back at regular intervals to make sure that nobody was following them.

On reaching the Chinese Embassy, Sanyal and his comrades were straightway taken to a living room, which served as their accommodation for the day. Next day morning, the Ambassador briefed them on the proposed itinerary.

'The Ambassador said that we would have to traverse through the Lhasa route in Tibet region and handed over us a route map to seek direction from. To guide us in the voyage, a Chinese youth would accompany us. But more importantly, the Ambassador said, a vehicle would transport us up to the Nepal–China border. From there, we will have to cross three large hills on foot in the course of a single day. Once we had crossed the hills, we would be again provided with transport for the onward journey,' Sanyal recalled.

That very afternoon, the team of four Naxalbari rebels and their 27-year-old Chinese guide were transported to the China border off Kathmandu. They alighted on the Nepal side of a hanging river bridge that connects the Himalayan kingdom to Tibet. By the time they stepped onto the bridge, dusk had already suspended over the horizon.

'Stepping on the hanging bridge, we realised that it was an old-abandoned bridge; the wooden planks were missing at several places all through the near 1 km stretch. We crawled ahead with utmost care. It took us over one and a half hours to crossover to the other side,' Sanyal pointed out.

On crossing the bridge, they landed up at the entrance of a tunnel dug through the mountain. The tunnel would lead them to a hilly terrain, which they would have to scale before the next sunrise. The remains of cigarette-*bidi* butts in front of the tunnel entrance came as an assurance that the route was in regular use for secret trips to China.

Towards the end of the tunnel, the track started to gradually ascend upwards; it moved through a serpentine and extremely uneven Himalayan tract. Tearing apart the slow-setting dusk with a kerosene lamp, the Chinese guide led the way; Khokhon Mazumdar, Khudan Mallick, Sanyal and Deepak Biswas followed him in the respective order.

'Deepak was lagging behind quite often than not, compelling the entire team to halt at short intervals. Upon enquiry, Deepak said that he was feeling feverish. Thus positioning him in front of me, I repositioned myself at the tail end of the team; I repeatedly asked Deepak to keep an eye on the comrades moving ahead of us.'

'But proving my apprehension true, within half an hour or so, Deepak lost track of the other comrades; we got isolated from the team. Amidst an all-encompassing darkness and the difficult hilly track, we started to move fast to catch up with the rest three; but unfortunately in the process we took to a wrong route. We landed up in a small Tibetan hamlet and were taken aback by the frightening barks of dogs. Hearing the dogs bark, their masters came out of their households and began to look for intruders.'

'Sensing danger, Deepak and I hid behind a cluster of wild shrubs; luckily we succeeded in duping the Tibetan villagers. After the villagers left, we climbed down following the same route through which we had ascended. Thankfully, the rest three comrades were waiting for us down below; they had retracted to the spot looking for us,' Sanyal elaborated.

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By the time the team reunited, they had lost some precious hours; it was already midnight but they could cross only one hill out of the

targeted three. To compensate for the time wasted, they referred to the route map looking for some shortcut. After thorough consideration, a shorter route was opted for but the track was many times difficult than the regular one.

Moving along the odd-tract, almost all of them sustained scratch injuries from the hard mountain rocks and were bleeding. After crossing the second hill, the team halted to take some rest; they ate cereals brought along by their young Chinese companion and quenched thirst by drinking water from a brook nearby. It was nearing dawn.

Without wasting any further time, the Naxalbari team resumed the journey. Quietly bypassing a few hamlets on the foothills, they began climbing up the third and final hill en route; once they cross this hill, as assured by the Chinese Ambassador, there would be a Chinese Army troop waiting to receive them.

'We had almost finished climbing three-fourths of the steep incline that we were brought to freeze by a sudden sharp loud shout. On looking up at the source of the sound, the scene that our eyes encountered left us almost breathless! A group of five masked men all dressed in black attrite were standing barely 20 metres away, pointing sophisticated rifles on us,' Sanyal continued.

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Recovering from the momentary shock, Sanyal and the rest four raised their hands in a surrendering posture. Sanyal also shouted the word 'friends' to calm down the trigger-ready masked-men. But that went in vain; instead of showing a sign of reconciliation, the armed men retorted something in Chinese.

Here came handy the Chinese guide who was accompanying Sanyal and his fellow comrades. After a brief interaction between him and the arms wielding men, the situation cooled down; the hitherto hostile masked group came forward and greeted the Naxalbari revolutionaries.

'The five armed men were members of the Chinese military force, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). They had been deputed at the site to receive us; but with our arrival being delayed than expected, they climbed up from the other side of the hill to find out if we had landed in some trouble,' Sanyal explained.

With the assistance of the PLA soldiers, the Naxalbari rebels resumed their onward journey and reached the foothills at dawn. On the metal-road down below, stood three military jeeps waiting to transport them to their next destination. Sanyal and his fellow revolutionaries were spellbound in happiness; at last, they were there in the 'pious land' of Communist China, the 'land of Chairman Mao'.

Upon acknowledging the spontaneous gesture, PLA soldiers drew the attention of the Naxalbari rebels to their physical condition. Sanyal, Khokhon, Khudan and Deepak—all were bleeding from multiples injuries on their body. They had sustained the injuries partly from scratches caused by rocks and partly by leech bites.

'Without wasting any more time, the PLA soldiers hurried us into a jeep and positioning it at the centre, the convoy of three military vehicles rolled out for the next destination. Barely a 20-minute drive, we arrived at the PLA camp at Chhamu. That was our halt for the day,' Sanyal recalled.

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At the Chhamu camp, they bathed with hot water, cleaned the wounds and applied a liquid medication that was provided to them. They were hungry; in breakfast, they savoured a heavy meal comprising hot fried rice and chicken. Having satisfied the empty stomach, the Naxalbari quartet slipped onto the bed in a room that was allotted to them. It was 10 o'clock in the morning.

'We were very tired and exhausted after the painful journey; it took us only a few minutes to fell in a deep slumber. When we were woken up again, it was past 10 o'clock in the night; we had dozed off for 12 hours at a stretch,' Sanyal said.

After dinner, a senior PLA officer called on them; he briefed about the next course of the journey. The next destination, the officer informed, would be Lhasa and the journey by road would commence early next morning. Given the distance and the difficult terrain, it would take two to three days to reach Lhasa, the officer added.

Next dawn, clad in PLA uniform and a heavy jacket, the Naxalbari rebels and their Chinese guide who had been accompanying them right from Kathmandu, set out for Lhasa in a military convoy. Henceforth, they will have to be dressed in PLA attire, they were told.

'The journey to Lhasa was quite enthralling. We moved through a serpentine road that progressed amidst tiny hillocks. Snow-clad shrubs and dwarf trees stood on either sides of the road as if in greeting the travellers. Halfway into the journey, we came across a large fascinating lake; never ever in my life I saw such a beautiful sight ever again!'

'The entire lake was covered with thousands of birds of hundreds of species and of different hues. The birds often winged upwards from the lake, but as if charmed by the mystic waters they came back again to the mesmerising water-body,' recalled Sanyal.

By afternoon, the Naxalbari revolutionaries reached a small town. Their convoy drove straight into the house of a Tibetan Lama—their shelter for the night. The huge wooden bungalow was equipped with all modern amenities. The journey resumed next morning, after breakfast.

On the afternoon of day 2, Sanyal and his comrades reached the outskirts of Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet. But to dodge public attention on the four unfamiliar looking PLA soldiers, the Chinese army officials decided against moving into Lhasa immediately. Instead, all of them halted back at a nearby PLA transit camp.

After the dusk had set in completely, their convoy rolled out again and within half an hour, they drove into a large PLA base camp, located right in the heart of Lhasa. On reaching there, their Chinese guide took a leave.

'This young Chinese guide knew fluent English; until then, he was acting as an interpreter between the PLA officials and us. But after he left, it became very difficult to communicate with anyone in the camp, because none could understand any other language but the Mandarin. As a result, henceforth, body language and postures became our only mode of communication with the Chinese military officials,' Sanyal explained.

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The Naxalbari team stayed at Lhasa for about eight days. The city being located in the Himalayas at a high altitude, there is dearth of oxygen in the air; as a result, it tends to cause hill sickness in those who are unaccustomed to such places.

Thus in the first few days, barring Sanyal, the rest three—Khohon, Khudan and Deepak fell ill. They were experiencing nausea and

headache. Responding to this quickly, the PLA officials deputed a team of military doctors to attend on them round the clock.

While his associates were recuperating from hill sickness, a senior PLA official asked Sanyal if he knew anyone called Krishna Bhakta Sharma. With Sanyal nodding in assent, he took him to *Norbulingka*—the Summer Palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa where Sharma was lodging as a guest of the Chinese government.

'After paying a visit to Peking, the capital of China, comrade Sharma was on his way back to India. When I met him at *Norbulingka*, Sharma clasped me and narrated how he had reached Peking wading through numerous odds. Unlike us, he did not approach the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu; instead, he infiltrated into Tibet on foot through the Bhutan–Nepal route.'

'PLA soldiers intercepted him in Tibet while he was roving through the region for days altogether without food or shelter. Unable to understand his language, the soldiers mistook him for a foreign spy and were about to shoot him that Sharma broke into tears and pointed repeatedly at the Mao Tse-tung badge that the PLA soldiers were wearing on their uniform.'

'At this, the soldiers mellowed down and took him to their camp. The camp officials arranged for a Nepali interpreter and upon learning about his identity and the purpose for infiltrating into Tibet, they arranged for Sharma's travel to Peking.'

'At Peking, he met several senior leaders of the Chinese Communist Party and availed lessons on Mao Tse-tung Thought. He also received some arms training, but was not granted an audience with Chairman Mao,' Sanyal said.

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On the fifth day of their stay in Lhasa, Sanyal's fellow comrades recovered from illness completely. Following this, the PLA officers informed that the four of them would be flown to Peking on the morning of day seven.

But due to the inclement weather at Lhasa, the plan had to be aborted at the last moment.

The weather became favourable on the eighth-day morning; accompanied by two senior PLA officers, the Naxalbari rebels took

off for Peking from Lhasa on a civilian aircraft. It was 30 September, the eve of the China Liberation Day.

'It was quite a long flight. The plane halted mid-way for refuelling at Urumqui—the capital of Xinjiang region. Making use of the hour-long halt, we were taken out in the city for lunch and a quick sight-seeing. Showing us a villa in Urumqui city, the PLA officers informed that Chou En-lai stayed at the villa whenever he visited the province,' Sanyal narrated.

About an hour later, the flight took off again from Urumqui; from here an English interpreter joined the Naxalbari quartet. The flight landed at Peking airport well past 9 in the evening. Soon on landing, there came an announcement asking all Chinese passengers on-board the aircraft to wait and allow the 'honoured foreign guests' to alight first.

'Among the four of us, Khudan had a slightly Mongolian look and he was of remarkably fair complexion. Moreover, by staying indoors for the past few days, he had turned more whitish. Thus as we were alighting from the aircraft with Khudan at the tail end, the cabin crew mistook him to be a Chinese and stopped him from proceeding along with us.'

'On coming down in the open, I noticed that Khudan was missing and drew the attention of a senior PLA official. It was only after this that he was again allowed to join us,' Sanyal recalled breaking into a laughter.

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A central committee member of the CPC had personally come to the airport to receive the Naxalbari rebels; he accorded them a warm welcome.

Upon exchanging greetings, they were divided into two groups: the CPC central committee member accommodated Sanyal in his car; the rest three comrades got into another. As their convoy rolled out of the airport, the CPC leader informed Sanyal that a team of senior-most PLA functionaries want to have an immediate discussion with them. They can take rest after the meeting was over, he said.

The Naxalbari team drove straight into Peking Hotel—a five-star category accommodation in the heart of Peking city. Shortly after

this, they sat for a meeting with senior PLA officials in a conference room at the hotel.

'Some 16 or 17 PLA commanders participated in the marathon meeting that lasted for well over two hours. They learnt about the happenings at Naxalbari at length; they wanted to know how it all began, how many weapons we had and what we plan to do next and so on and so forth.'

'After fulfilling their quest, I told the PLA commanders that we were in China to get a first-hand knowledge of the Mao Tse-tung Thought; we want to learn both its political and military aspects. The PLA officers reciprocated in assent and assured us arranging special training sessions for this.'

'One interesting aspect of the meeting was that unlike the practice in India, none served us tea or any other beverage all through the marathon discussion. Instead, there were hot water flasks, tea bags and sugar cubes placed in front of every participant; whenever anyone felt like having a cup of tea, he self-served himself,' Sanyal pointed out.

Soon after the meeting, an argument broke out between Sanyal and the rest three comrades, especially with Deepak Biswas. Deepak was peeved at the fact that while narrating the unfolding of Naxalbari uprising, Sanyal did not make a mention of Charu Mazumdar.

'On this, I countered by clarifying that since Charu *Da* was not physically involved in the Naxalbari uprising, I did not find any immediate context to make a reference to him. But Deepak was not satisfied with my clarification and this created a rift between us,' Sanyal said.

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The next day was 1 October—the China Liberation Day. This is an occasion in China for official as well as mass celebrations all across the Communist Republic.

To enable the Naxalbari revolutionaries catch a glimpse of the celebrations, the Chinese hosts took them out on a tour of Peking city. And the more they roamed about the bustling city, the more were they amazed by the euphoric ambience prevailing all around. Sanyal and his comrades were also taken to the Tiananmen Square where Chairman Mao Tse-tung was scheduled to address the central celebrations.

'At Tiananmen Square, there were two multi-storied galleries on both sides of the rostrum; we were offered seats on the right-hand one. Couched in the VIP gallery up above, I was wondering as to where would the public assemble to listen to Chairman Mao? The ground in front of the rostrum was covered with a huge garden and there was hardly any space for the people to assemble!'

'But the puzzle got resolved as soon as Chairman Mao, Chou En-lai and other senior leaders stepped onto the dais: the whole garden erupted in applause and sloganeering! Actually, the participants were squatting on the ground holding fresh flowers over their heads; they were so disciplined that it created the illusion of a real garden,' Sanyal said exhibiting a sense of amazement as he recalled the incident.

Mao Tse-tung did not deliver a speech; he only wished people on the China Liberation Day and then returned to his chair on the podium. The other leaders present spoke at length. Immediately after the deliberations, a vivid cultural extravaganza and performances followed one after another. Enthralled by the spectacular show when the Naxalbari revolutionaries returned to their hotel, it was well past midnight.

On the next day morning, the Naxalbari rebels were taken to the Hall of the People in Peking for a formal introduction with Mao Tse-tung. Apart from them, there were a large number of other foreign guests, who had come to see the chairman. Accompanied by Chou En-lai, Mao shook hands with all the guests one by one.

'It was a great honour for us and despite Mao being such a legendary leader, we could relate to him through the brief meeting. It felt like he was one of us,' Sanyal pointed out.

The next day, that is, on 3 October, a four-member team of the Chinese Communist Party and a Hindi interpreter called upon the Naxalbari quartet at Peking Hotel. They advised that the revolutionaries should spend at least a year in China to assimilate Mao Tse-tung tactics in its entirety.

Although amazed by the proposal, Sanyal explained that they would not be able to stay put for such a long time. This was because they had come to Peking in the midst of Naxalbari struggle and there was hardly anyone back at home to carry forward the strife.

It was then mutually agreed upon that the Naxalbari rebels would stay put in China for three months. During this period, they would

try to learn about both the ideological approach and military tactics of Chairman Mao.

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On 4 October 1967, a special training session commenced at Peking Hotel to teach the Naxalbari rebels the ideological aspect of Mao Tse-tung Thought. Among the four instructors deputed for the purpose, all spoke fluent English; two of them were ladies. A Hindi interpreter was also there for assistance.

They worked out three separate modules—one on the philosophical basis of Mao Tse-tung Thought, another on its political foundation and the third one on Mao Tse-tung's views on socialism. The classes would start at 9 in the morning and continue till 5 in the afternoon; in between there was a scheduled one-hour lunch break from 12 noon.

In the evening, the Naxalbari rebels would be taken out in the city for recreation. The outing was also meant to show them the various monuments relating to the Chinese Revolution. Back in the hotel, watching documentaries made on the Chinese Revolution was another form of recreation.

'The class-room was located next to the two rooms in which we were lodging at the hotel. Deepak and I used to stay in one room and Khudan and Khokhon lodged in the other. But despite living in the same room, Deepak would seldom interact with me. He was still annoyed over my not mentioning of Charu *Da*'s name during the first interaction with PLA commanders,' recalled Sanyal.

The theory classes continued for over one and a half months. By then, making use of the one day weekly off, Sanyal and his fellow comrades were taken to different towns and localities around the city of Peking. The purpose of such trips was to facilitate them an opportunity to interact with the individuals who had actively participated in the Anti-Jap War in China.

Through with the theory classes, next in line was the military training; for this, the Naxalbari revolutionaries were relocated to a PLA base camp faraway from Peking.

The military training was divided into two modules. The first module contained theoretical aspects of military science; the second module was pertaining to practical training in operating firearms and ammunitions.

'On the first day of the military training, a physical trainer asked us to run across a huge open field. Unfortunately, I could not withstand the hardship and collapsed midway becoming unconscious for a few minutes.'

'Consequent to this, the head of the training camp rebuked the physical trainer saying that before asking us to undertake the exercise, he should have assessed our individual physical capabilities and our habits. But in bypassing the standard practice, what the instructor did was nothing but adventurism, the chief added.'

'The words of the camp chief carried a larger meaning for me, that is, revolutionary strategies should be formulated keeping in mind the ground realities and not out of whims and fancy. It is the responsibility of both the preacher and the practitioner to concede this vital reality,' Sanyal pointed out.

The arms training will commence at dawn and conclude only in the evening. After this, there will be screening of military documentaries filmed during the Chinese Revolution. Once the documentary screenings are over, the PLA trainers would get into an interactive session with the Naxalbari trainees, highlighting to them the strong points of Chinese Revolution.

'Through all such interactions, they made us understand that no revolution could succeed without the support of people. Support of the common masses is a precondition irrespective of the nature of the battleground—be it a mountainous region or a valley. This was why, they said, Mao Tse-tung had named the Chinese Revolution as People's War,' Sanyal recalled.

During the month-long military exercise, Sanyal and his comrades were imparted training in operating machineguns, automated rifles, lobbing grenades and planting mines. They were also given hands-on training in making explosives.

Once the training was over, the PLA instructors handed over the Naxalbari rebels the explosives that they had manufactured during the trials. They asked the Naxalbari team to test blast the explosives while on their way back to India.

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With the completion of both military and ideological training relating to the Mao Tse-tung Thought, it was now time for the Naxalbari

revolutionaries to return to India. Before embarking on the journey back home, they got about a week to spend in China at leisure.

'It was the December of 1967; in Peking, December is considered the peak of winter, which is simply a terrible season out there in China. Those of us, who live in northern Bengal, consider the winter of Darjeeling to be the most shivering one; but in China the winter is really a deadly season. Those who have not spent a winter in China can hardly imagine the freezing experience,' Sanyal pointed out.

Braving the chilling cold, the Naxalbari rebels stayed enmeshed in farewell lunch and supper at various establishments of the Chinese government in and around Peking.

'One such supper was hosted for us at a PLA camp located on the outskirts of Peking. The arrangements were very elaborate and extravagant, facilitating us a sense of self-importance. While we were savouring the sumptuous meal, our host, the commandant of the PLA camp asked us to eat well. He said this with a tint of derision.'

'*We know there is scarcity of food in your country; better eat as much as you can now*,' the commandant said. 'His comment hurt my sentiments very deeply and I told the PLA commandant on his face that we were in China to acquire lessons on Mao Tse-tung Thought and not because there was dearth of food in India. Following this verbal spat, the air became too heavy and robbed the farewell supper of its joyous mood,' Sanyal said narrating.

Three days after the 'not so pleasant' supper, Chou En-lai invited the Naxalbari team to his official residence for dinner. Chou had been to Dhaka and Calcutta and was familiar with the Bengali community's affinity for fish; he specially arranged for a number of fish preparations in the menu.

'A full sized boiled fish with spices sprinkled all over it was served on the dinner table. I could not recognise the fish but its taste was simply mouth-watering,' recalled Sanyal.

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With only a few days remaining of their stay in Peking, the Naxalbari team paid visit to the numerous tourist sites located in the surroundings. They did some shopping as well. But deep in his heart, Sanyal was nurturing an intense desire to interact with Chairman Mao, the possibility of which seemed very bleak.

Amidst this, accompanied by their Chinese guides, the Naxalbari group was roaming about in central Peking one evening when they came across a life-size statue of Mao Tse-tung at a road intersection. On seeing the statue, Sanyal proposed that since there was no hope of being photographed with the living legend, they better took a few snaps with his statue instead. The other three of his team members nodded readily and they took several group photographs with Mao's statue.

'The gesture amazed our Chinese companions and probably they had reported the matter to their higher-ups. Two days before our scheduled departure from Peking, a group of central committee members of the Chinese Communist Party called on us in the evening. They asked us to dress up at once saying that we were to meet an important personality, but gave us no clue as to who the person was.'

'From the hotel, we drove in straight to the Hall of the People and were asked to wait for a while. But it proved a long wait and in order to kill time, we helped ourselves with tea, one cup after another. Bringing our prolonged wait to an end, an attendant finally turned up and asked us to proceed through an adjacent corridor.'

'On taking a few steps, to our sheer delight, we saw Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai standing at the tail end of the long corridor. One cannot simply gauge the level of our excitement; holding high the Red Book in hand, we took to sloganeering in spontaneity: *Mao Tse-tung Zindabad, Chou En Lai Zindabad...*'

'Interestingly on getting closer to them, we discovered that Chou En-lai was also reverberating our slogans. In his typical Chinese accent, Chou was repeating *Mao Tse-tung Zindabad, Chou En Lai Zindabad.* It was a real amazement!'

'The moment Chou reintroduced me to Mao as the leader of the Naxalbari delegation, Mao instantly clasped me to his chest. His was a huge figure at over six feet height, whereas I was not even five feet; I got completely lost in his hug. It was such an overwhelming experience that I was robbed of words for the next few moments. There were so many issues I wanted to ask Mao about, but nothing was coming to my mind!'

'Breaking the silence, Chou offered us seating on a nearby sofa. I sat beside Mao and my rest three comrades parked themselves next to me one after another. Chou couched himself on a single sofa placed on the opposite side.'

'Mao offered me a cigarette and although I seldom smoked, in a bid to appear smart I readily took the cigarette from him. Lighting another puff himself, Mao started a conversation that lasted for about 45 minutes. Half of the time was taken by Chou in interpreting the conversation as Mao spoke only Mandarin.'

'Mao said there was a strong similarity in the basic character of the Chinese Revolution and the Naxalbari uprising and that was why the Chinese Communist Party has extended its support to the Indian revolutionaries. But he clarified that the support was for the Indian revolutionaries as a whole and not for any individual leader in particular.'

'Reflecting on the Indo-China border dispute, he assured that if the Communist revolutionaries ever occupy the power in India, China would amicably resolve the territorial dispute to the benefit of both the countries. Making a reference to the latest trends in the International Communist Movement, Mao opined that the International Communist Convention being convened by Russia was intended at derailing the global Communist Movement from the Marxist-Leninist principles.'

'*But the conspiracy would fail,*' he thundered. Of all the remarks, the most important one that Chairman Mao made as regards the Naxalbari Movement came towards the end of the conversation.

'*Forget everything you have learnt here in China. Once back in Naxalbari, formulate your own revolutionary strategies, keeping in mind the ground realities over there,* Mao had advised,' recalled Sanyal.

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In mid-December 1967, after spending three months in China, the Naxalbari rebels embarked on a return trip to India. Carrying with them the explosives manufactured during the training session, they flew out from Peking to Lhasa on a civilian aircraft.

On reaching Lhasa, they lodged at the PLA camp; here they were to revise the arms training that they had received in Peking. Over the next one week, Sanyal, Khudan, Khokhon and Deepak exhibited their skills in handling arms and ammunitions. They successfully operated machinegun, automated rifles, pistols and so on; the explosives brought from Peking were also put to successful tests.

After the revision exercise, the Naxalbari revolutionaries got into a discussion with a few top-ranked PLA officers of Lhasa. The agenda was to chalk out a strategy for future cooperation between the Communist rebels of India and the Chinese army. In this crucial meet, the PLA officers advised them to minimise the use of the Chinese Embassy at Kathmandu for regular communications. Instead, they suggested establishing a secret transit-route with camps at regular distance along the Nepal–Bhutan route to China.

'They had already identified a number of locations for setting up the proposed camps and handed us over a map of this. The transit-camps were envisaged for the use of Indian revolutionaries visiting China on military training and to smuggle in arms–ammunitions. The PLA officials assured us full monetary support towards the cost of establishing such camps and in fact asked us to collect an advance of ₹10,000 from their Embassy at Kathmandu,' Sanyal pointed out.

'After this, the Naxalbari team set out for Kathmandu from Lhasa; but unlike earlier, on the return trip, they were not required to walk through the difficult terrain. A massive repair work was then underway on the Lhasa–Kathmandu road; exploiting this, the PLA officers hid us in an engineering vehicle that was going to Kathmandu in connection with the road reconstruction job.'

'The vehicle would stop only after reaching the Chinese Embassy at Kathmandu, we were told in advance; we were provided with packed food and water bottles to sustain ourselves during the near three-day journey. We had started from Lhasa on 22 December and reached Kathmandu on the night of 24 December. Despite travelling in the engineering vehicle, the journey was not that troublesome,' Sanyal recalled.

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They halted for the night at the Chinese Embassy at Kathmandu. The Ambassador was personally present to supervise their accommodation; he also joined them at dinner.

On being told by the Naxalbari rebels that they want to set out for India the very next day, the Ambassador gave them ₹10,000 in Nepali currency. The money was given towards establishing secret transit camps to China as had been decided in the meeting with the PLA officers at Lhasa.

Next dawn, bidding goodbye to the Chinese Embassy officials, Sanyal and his three comrades reached the Kathmandu bus terminus and boarded the first bus to Birgunj on the Indian border. They reached Birgunj at around 4.30 in the afternoon and immediately crossed over to Raxaul in Bihar.

'Without wasting any time at Raxaul, we got into a train to New Jalpaiguri station near Siliguri. By the next day afternoon, we were there at our destination,' Sanyal pointed out.

On reaching New Jalpaiguri, they were now faced with the challenge of finding a safe refuge: if they choose to stay back in Siliguri there is every possibility of landing up in police net; but for going to Naxalbari, there was no conveyance immediately available at their disposal.

With this dilemma in mind, at the insistence of Deepak Biswas, the quartet went to the house of a party sympathiser in Siliguri town. From there, Sanyal sent a messenger to Charu Mazumdar, requesting him to arrange for some transport to ferry them to Naxalbari at the earliest possible.

Within an hour of receiving the communiqué, Mazumdar sent in a jeep; Sanyal, Khudan, Khokhon and Deepak set out for Naxalbari late in the evening.

They reached Kesthopur tea garden off Bagdogra at around 11 in the night and sent back the jeep to Siliguri. From Kesthopur, traversing through tea bushes and forest, the group reached Choupukhuria, a strong base of the Naxalbari revolutionaries before they went to China.

'We arrived at the house of Bandhu Oran, our leading comrade in the area. Upon exchanging greetings, he informed that the police had set up a camp in the village and hence, Choupukhuria was no longer a safe haven for the rebels.'

'On hearing this, I began to ponder where we could now find a shelter in the dead of night. Oran's daughter suggested that we take refuge amidst the mounds of hay piled up at an isolated site not very far from their house. With there being no other option, we instantly grasped onto the offer. Oran's daughter led us to the site and then went back home only to re-emerge with some *Panta Bhat*, rice soaked in water, for our dinner,' Sanyal recalled.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sanyal's three-month absence from the conflict zone—from September to December 1967—had weakened the Naxalbari Movement considerably. In the absence of a leader, the activists were demoralised; majority of them either surrendered or were arrested by the police.

The police and the paramilitary forces also succeeded in setting up camps in almost all the villages in Terai, which used to be a strong bastion of the Communist rebels till the other day. As a result, the handful of revolutionaries who were still continuing the fight was falling short of shelters and other necessary logistics.

'Apart from this, there was another piece of demoralising news waiting for us! In pursuance of Charu *Da*'s strategy, in those three months our activist-comrades had resorted to widespread individual annihilation. They killed a number of traders and middle-class farmers who were known personally to me; those killed were not at all hostile towards the revolutionaries.'

'Hiding in Choupukhuria for two days, I took stock of the entire situation. Considering all factors, I decided to relocate to Jabar Ali village located beside Sanyasisthan Tea Estate near Bagdogra. The village

had not fallen to police invasion until then and moreover, none of our activists from the village had surrendered to the state forces,' Sanyal pointed out.

Along with Sanyal, Deepak Biswas, Khudanlal Mallick and Khokhon Mazumdar also shifted to Jabar Ali. Local activists provided them accommodation in their house; the group soon swung into action to revive the agitation at the earliest possible.

Sanyal held separate meetings with the men, women and children of the village assigning each of these groups with a specific task. The responsibility to procure indigenous arms and weapons fell upon the men; the women were asked to keep a round-the-clock vigil on police movements in and around the village and the children were designated as couriers to ferry classified letters to and from the activists based in nearby villages.

On their part, to negate the risk of police attention, Sanyal and his three associates donned the look of village males. They put on knee-long loincloth and tattered vest—a common male attire in the villages of Bengal. During day time, they worked in the paddy fields with farmers; in the evening, they held secret meetings with fellow activists from in and around Jabar Ali.

Meanwhile, the ripple effect of the Naxalbari agitation and the corresponding police offensive led to a chaotic situation in urban West Bengal. The state capital Calcutta was no exception. The Progressive Democratic Alliance Front (PDAF) government of Bengal, headed by Chief Minister, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, was failing to put a lid on the fast spreading rebellion.

As a result of this, the President of India dismissed the West Bengal government on 20 February 1968; Governor Dharam Vira took charge of the state administration. He ordered the police to quell the revolt with an iron hand. This notwithstanding, Sanyal and his team were carrying on with their endeavours to revive the agitation at Naxalbari.

'In a span of barely three to four months, we succeeded in rejuvenating the organisation in at least 11 villages dotting around Jabar Ali. But unlike before, this time we chose not to launch an immediate offensive on the state forces,' Sanyal recalled.

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A significant aspect of the Naxalbari uprising was its rapid spread to faraway places. The agitation did not stay confined within the geographical limits of its place of origin; it had an enormous influence on the Communists of other parts of India.

The All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR)—a national platform of radical Communists stemmed out of the Naxalbari uprising. Beginning November 1967 when it was formed, the AICCCR was functioning from within the CPI-M; in April 1968, it assumed an independent entity.

Apart from Charu Mazumdar, prominent CPI-M leaders such as T. Nagi Reddy, Kanai Chatterjee, Sushital Roy Choudhury, Saroj Dutta, Ashit Sen and others had aligned with the AICCCR.

However, right from the beginning, Nagi Reddy and Chatterjee differed with the other leaders on the strategy for an armed revolution. Chatterjee was of the opinion that armed struggle and annihilation of the 'class enemy' should be resorted to only after building up mass agitations; but majority in the AICCCR rejected the idea. This led to a rift and both Chatterjee and Nagi Reddy gradually distanced themselves from the AICCCR along with their followers in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh.

Round the same time, much to the discomfort of the predominant sections of the AICCCR, the news of a difference of opinion between Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar began coming to light. To prove this untrue, the AICCCR leadership approached Sanyal. In June 1968, when Sanyal was striving hard to rejuvenate the revolutionary activities in Terai, Mazumdar summoned him to Siliguri for a meeting with Sushital Roy Choudhury.

'The meeting was convened at Charu *Da*'s residence. During the discussion, Roy Choudhury requested me to prepare a detailed report elaborating the course of the Naxalbari Movement till then. When I turned down the request, he insisted that my reporting was necessary to nullify the news of a rift between Charu *Da* and me; this was a must to maintain the unity of the Communist revolutionaries across India, he said.'

'Despite the rift being a reality, I finally succumbed to Roy Choudhury's persistent pressure; I agreed to pen a report on the Naxalbari Movement to be tabled in the AICCCR's forthcoming

session. My consideration was that if a cover up of my differences with Charu *Da* could facilitate the formation of a true revolutionary party, so be it. But after all these years, I now lament, had not I succumbed to Roy Choudhury's pressure that day, the course of the Communist Movement in India today would have been entirely different,' Sanyal maintained.

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By mid-1968, Sanyal was able to regroup almost all the frontline comrades—Jangal Santhal, Keshav Sarkar, Babulal Biswakarma, Kuru Munda and Joseph Oran. These comrades had played a crucial role during the outbreak of the Naxalbari uprising in May 1967.

Under Sanyal's leadership, they now decided to hold an underground conference to take stock of the past 18 months' struggle. The move was aimed at formulating the future course of action. The conference was scheduled for 15 September, the venue being a remote village near Burragunj at Naxalbari. All the leading activists undertook a secret publicity campaign to draw maximum number of grass-roots workers to the conference.

'On September 7, Babulal Biswakarma, Khokhon Mazumdar, Kuru Munda and Joseph Oran set out from Jabar Ali village on one such publicity drive. In the event of a face-off with police, they had only one rifle with them for defence; the rifle was with Babulal. They reached Hatighisha towards afternoon and were taking rest at a local sympathiser household that the police raided the village. In a hurry to escape, the four of them got scattered.'

'Khokhon and Joseph managed to flee from the village; Babulal and Kuru took refuge in a nearby jute plantation. Babulal fired three bullets from the hiding and succeeded in stopping the police from marching any further into the village.'

'All through the afternoon, they hid amidst the dense jute plantation and with there being no sign of the police presence, Babulal crawled out in the open in the evening. But in reality, the police had not left the village; they were hiding in the vicinity. Babulal had advanced only a few steps towards the village that the cops fired at him from all three sides; he received eight bullets and succumbed on the spot.'

'After spending the entire night inside the jute plantation, Kuru somehow managed to return to Jabar Ali the next day and narrated the incident,' Sanyal recalled.

The death of Babulal Biswakarma came as a huge blow for the revolutionaries. Close on the heels of this, most of the frontline activists such as Jangal Santhal, Joseph Oran, Khohkhon Mazumdar and Khudanlal Mallick fell into the police net one by one.

To evade arrest, Sanyal started relocating his base at quick successions; if he is at Jabar Ali today, the next day he is at Shivmandir near Matigara and after a few days he will take refuge at Choupukhuria. But even amid this, Sanyal continued to carry on with the organisational activities along with Keshav Sarkar and Kadamlal Mallick.

During this period, Sanyal drafted the *Terai Report* on Naxalbari Movement and sent it to Sushital Roy Choudhury via Charu Mazumdar. Much to the delight of the AICCCR leadership, the report put to rest all controversies over the internal feud amongst the Naxalbari revolutionaries. It also succeeded in creating the impression that there was no point of divergence between Sanyal and Charu Mazumdar.

But in the *Terai Report*, without directly contradicting Mazumdar's stance on raising small combat groups, Sanyal had advocated the gradual formation of a peoples' militia to take on the existing system. To weigh the feasibility of the suggestion, Sanyal, Charu Mazumdar, Deepak Biswas, Keshav Sarkar and Kadamlal Mallick soon assembled for a meeting at Mooni Tea Estate near Hatighisa.

In that meeting, Mazumdar termed Sanyal's proposal impractical and once again advocated the formation of small combat groups to take the struggle forward.

'I countered his argument by drawing reference from the *Hunan Revolution* in China, where the entire peasantry was converted into a Communist militia. Consequent to the argument and cross arguments, the meeting ended inconclusive.'

'The AICCCR leadership on the other hand made the *Terai Report* public without formally discussing it in the organisation. They also did not express any interest in getting a report on our China trip. This was true in case of all the three delegations that visited China—the one-man delegation of Krishna Bhakta Sharma,

the four-member team led by me and then the one-man team of Sourin Bose. Bose had gone to China in December 1967, just about the time when we were on our way back.'

'That was because under Charu *Da*'s clout, the AICCCR leadership was even averse to listening to the criticisms that the Chinese Communist Party had put forward,' Sanyal pointed out.

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Sanyal's continuing evasion of arrest by frequently shifting his base put the local police under tremendous pressure from their higher-ups. The top brass in the state police served an ultimatum to the local officers to nab Sanyal at the earliest. But notwithstanding their desperate attempts, the police did not succeed until two of Sanyal's ground level aides indulged in perfidy on 30 October 1968.

'Only a day before, I, along with Keshav Sarkar and Kadamlal Mallick, had relocated to the Birsingh Jote village near Taipoo Tea Estate. It was early in the morning and not all of us had woken up yet that a large contingent of police encircled the village; the heavily armed cops narrowed down on us very quickly.'

'The then Darjeeling district superintendent of police, Arun Prashad Mukhopadhyay, himself led the foray and we got no chance either to escape or put up a resistance,' Sanyal said.

During the raid, police arrested nine revolutionaries in all. They were immediately taken to the Kurseong Jail and from there they were relocated to Darjeeling Jail. Jangal Santhal and Khokhon Mazumdar, who had been arrested earlier, were already lodged there.

At the Darjeeling Jail, though the Communist rebels were kept in an isolated block away from the common prisoners, they were not provided with any additional facility that are usually given to political prisoners. This had prompted Jangal Santhal to go on an indefinite fast demanding recognition as political prisoners. Upon their arrival at the jail, Sanyal and eight other revolutionaries joined the fast.

Though the jail administration did not concede the demand, Sanyal succeeded in establishing a rapport with the superintendent of the jail who was an Anglo-Indian. During the routine inspection every night, the jail super used to drop a newspaper in Sanyal's cell.

It was not very long after that Sanyal became desperate to come out of the jail; by then his bail petition had been rejected by the court. He along with two other associate comrades, Kadamlal Mallick and B.S. Dewan, chalked out a plan to escape from the jail. Dewan being a resident of the hills was familiar with the topography and hence, he was at the forefront of the escape plan.

'For three months, we secretly slit the iron bars of the prison cells; we had decided to use the jail's main drain as our escape route. The plan was that first we would sneak out of the jail on a favourable night and then crossover to bordering Nepal by dawn. As a matter of precaution, we did not inform any other comrades about the preparation; we had decided to inform them at the last minute,' Sanyal pointed out.

In order to make the plan a success, Sanyal and B.S. Dewan befriended the jail guards by offering them food from their own share. They also procured a few hand grenades and liquid potassium cyanide with the help of the jail's vegetable supplier. Potassium cyanide was procured with the intention of poisoning the night guards; grenades were meant for counter-attack in the event of a face-off with police at the time of escape.

'In desperation to come out free, I had become so cruel that I had chalked out a plan to serve cyanide laced milk to the night guards. To ensure the authenticity of the poisonous chemical, I asked comrade Dewan to offer some poisoned milk to the cat that used to loiter in the jail,' recalled Sanyal.

But when the cat did not die even after sipping a bowl-full of poisoned milk, it raised alarm in Sanyal's mind. Probably the authorities had got a wind of their plan and made the vegetable vendor supply some other innocuous chemical instead of cyanide. The plan for a jailbreak was aborted at once.

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The prosecution initiated three murder cases against Sanyal and his aides. Of this one case was pertaining to the killing of the manager of Singbulli Tea Estate in the hills; the rebels had killed the manager during an arms loot foray.

Having shelved the plan for a jailbreak, Sanyal now proposed appointing a defence lawyer to fight for them in court. This

triggered a controversy among the Communist rebels lodged in Darjeeling Jail.

'From his house in Siliguri, Charu *Da* had issued the diktat that none of the revolutionaries should opt for defence in court. Instead if we were too eager to get freed, we should try breaking out from the jail, he had said. Out of us 23 comrades lodged in the Darjeeling Jail, most were blindly supporting Charu *Da*'s diktat and this became the source of the controversy.'

'But unfazed by this, I stayed firm on my stand. I reminded others that even Karl Marx had once opted for defence in court. *Charu Da is surely not wiser than Marx*, I said,' Sanyal recalled.

Within a few days from that, Harendranath Ghosh, an advocate at the Calcutta High Court who sympathised with the revolutionary cause, came to Darjeeling Jail. Ghosh volunteered to defend the Naxalbari rebels without charging a fee.

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The President's Rule imposed in West Bengal on 20 February 1968 was lifted on 25 February 1969. This paved the way for a mid-term election to the state Assembly. In the Assembly poll, the United Front coalition came to power in Bengal; CPI-M was the main constituent of this ruling coalition.

On 9 April 1969, the United Front government withdrew all litigations pending against Sanyal and he was released from Darjeeling Jail. On the day of his release, Harekrishna Konar came all the way from Calcutta to hold a discussion with Sanyal.

'Konar waited for me at the jail's visitors' room, but I declined meeting him; I walked out straight of the jail. I did so for two reasons: first, in 1967 when Konar was the state land and land revenue minister, he did not bother to pay a tribute to our comrades killed in the police firing at Naxalbari on 25 May. This was even as he was very quick to pay a tribute to police officer Sonam Wangdi, who was killed by the rebels a day before. Secondly, if I had met Konar that day, my rival faction would have got a chance to malign me by falsely suggesting an understanding between me and the CPI-M.'

'But after all these years as I look back now, I feel that I should have given Konar a hearing even if only to know what he had to say,' Sanyal said.

On being freed from jail, Sanyal came down to Siliguri and went home to see his mother. That was the first time in two years that he was meeting his mother, who was his 'closest friend' in the family; the last time he met her was in early 1967, before the Naxalbari uprising broke out.

'By then our family had relocated to a new rented house and my immediate younger brother had got married. *Maa* embraced me extending both her arms; tears rolled down her eyes in silence. She spoke only after a while, insisting that I must spend a few days at home,' recalled Sanyal.

That very night, Charu Mazumdar summoned Sanyal to his Mahanandapara residence. Mazumdar informed that the AICCCR leadership wanted Sanyal to attend the forthcoming conference of the organisation in Calcutta and advised him to oblige.

Owing to his ever-growing mental distance with Mazumdar, Sanyal initially showed very little inclination in visiting Calcutta. But senior comrade Sourin Bose persuaded him by pointing out that AICCCR conference was the best platform where Sanyal could place his views. Consequent to this, Sanyal finally relented.

'To be candid, I had a streak of feudal emotions active in me, which made me not to oppose elders in public even if there were justified grounds, or compromise my own stand at the request of my acquaintances. Thus notwithstanding my strong distaste for Charu *Da*'s brand of politics, I never made this loud and clear when I should have.'

'Instead, on every such occasion, I stood by Charu *Da*, making myself an apparent party to his strategy and political outlook,' Sanyal lamented.

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Accompanied by Sourin Bose, Sanyal left for Calcutta in mid-April. While leaving home, mother Nirmala walked along with him for quite a distance before she bid a tearful adieu. She urged Sanyal to stay in touch with the family.

The AICCCR conference in Calcutta commenced on 19 April on the third floor of Tower Hotel on Mahatma Gandhi Road in Sealdah. Despite his ill health, Charu Mazumdar also travelled all the way from Siliguri to attend the meet.

At the conference, Sanyal met several important leaders such as R.P. Shroff, who had quit as the CPI-M Jammu and Kashmir state secretary; Shiv Kumar Mishra, who had quit from the CPI-M central committee; Nibaran Bora of the CPI-M Assam state committee and Satnarayan Singh of Bihar and Saroj Dutta who belonged to Bengal.

'There was a galaxy of leaders present at the conference; while I already knew some of them, there were many whom I was meeting for the first time. The conference continued for the next few days and finally on 27 April, it was decided to float a new party in the name and style of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).'

'The new entity was described as *a party for armed struggle*. Comrade Saroj Dutta proposed that 22 April being the birth centenary of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin—it should go down in the record as the formation date of the CPI-ML. Every one of us readily approved the idea,' Sanyal pointed out.

But a streak of internal difference surfaced right at the CPI-ML's formative conference itself. A section of senior functionaries from Uttar Pradesh led by Shreenarayan Tiwari was of the opinion that AICCCR be allowed to continue to function in its current form for another year; the new party should be floated only after reviewing the yearlong activities, they suggested.

However, with the majority at the conference turning down the proposal, the Uttar Pradesh faction walked out of the meet in protest. Without paying a heed to this, the conference moved ahead and formed an 11-member central organising committee of the CPI-ML, which included Charu Mazumdar, Kanu Sanyal, Saroj Dutta, Sourin Bose, Sushital Roy Choudhury, Shiv Kumar Mishra, Satnarayan Singh, R.P. Shroff, Panchadri Krishnamurti, Chowdary Tejeswararao and L. Appu. Mazumdar was elected convener of the organising committee.

The CPI-ML central organising committee decided to make a public announcement about the formation of the new party. That will be done on 1 May through a public rally at the Monument Maidan in Calcutta; Kanu Sanyal was unanimously chosen to do the honour.

'But I was not eager to make the announcement as most of my co-revolutionaries from Naxalbari were still languishing in jails; I had

promised them that we would discuss in detail every aspects of our struggle, including the differences that existed amongst us, before deciding on a collective future course of action.'

'I suggested that Charu *Da* should announce the party's formation. But as it had happened in the past, this time too, I succumbed to peer pressure. On 1 May 1969, at a public rally at Monument Maidan, I announced the birth of the CPI-ML with Charu *Da* seated beside me on the dais.'

'It was several years later that I could realise that the party leadership had planned this in order to dissuade the growing public perception about the differences existing between me and Charu *Da*,' observed Sanyal.

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Soon after the formation of the CPI-ML, Charu Mazumdar sent in a communiqué to the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) urging for support. But the CPC took its time to weigh the request; the birth of CPI-ML was announced by Peking Radio not before 2 July 1969.

The party got a shot in the arm by the CPC announcement; subsequent to this, the *annihilation of class enemies* as prescribed by Charu Mazumdar intensified by many folds.

Across West Bengal, young college and university students-turned-revolutionaries indulged in indiscriminate killings of police officials and individuals critical of the Naxalbari agitation. This became a predominant trend especially in the south Bengal districts; in Calcutta, the rebels even murdered senior-most Forward Bloc leader Hemanta Bose in broad public view.

'Encouraged by this apparent spread of revolution, Charu *Da* now coined a new slogan: *Bourgeois Shiksha Babayastha Nipat Jak*, Down with the Bourgeois Education System. He urged students to boycott schools and colleges and denounce the bourgeois education completely. Charu *Da* was making such moves without consulting the CPI-ML central organising committee.'

'Subsequent to the boycott call, Charu *Da*'s urban followers began targeting the educational institutions across West Bengal. They bombed, vandalised, burned down schools and colleges; teachers opposing such acts of violence were also attacked.'

'Ironically, while all this was happening at Charu *Da*'s behest, his wife Lila *Di* refused to follow the diktat. In open defiance, she continued taking her two daughters and a son to school and this became a talk of the town. The state-owned All India Radio repeated the news several times for an entire week. This was aimed at exposing the contradictions between what the revolutionaries were preaching and what they practiced,' Sanyal recalled.

By the end of May 1969, the United Front government in West Bengal granted a general amnesty to all Naxalbari revolutionaries lodged in the jails at Darjeeling and Siliguri. Around that time, a large section of Communist activists hitherto associated with the Naxalbari agitation, switched over to the CPI-M. Subsequently, at the administration's behest they indulged in conspiracy against other revolutionaries.

'Kamakhya Banerjee was one such activist-turned-police informer who was based at Borojhoru Jote village near Naxalbari. In connivance with the police, he had barred the entry of local villagers to a nearby forest where they used to go for collecting firewood. Kamakhya had also framed a false case against comrade Punjab Rao and Mangal Karmakar in connection with the arson at a poor *Adivasi*'s hutment. Peeved at this, our comrades decided to annihilate Kamakhya and sought a go ahead from me.'

'Unfortunately blinded by a sense of revenge, I gave them the permission and eventually Kamakhya was hacked to death. That was perhaps the greatest misdeed I ever committed. It was I who always opposed Charu *Da*'s call for individual annihilation; ironically, in this case I took recourse to the very method that I abhorred,' Sanyal lamented.

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The spark of revolt spread to the other states of India; it ignited revolutionary flames in the rural parts of Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and a few other states.

The rebellion at Srikakulam district in Andhra Pradesh was most vigorous in character. Following Charu Mazumdar's instruction, late in July 1969, Sanyal and Sourin Bose went to Srikakulam with the aim to guide and assist the revolutionaries there.

Srikakulam used to be one of the most backward areas in Andhra Pradesh inhabited by the *Adivasi*s. Predominantly a hilly terrain, the

two aboriginal tribes of Srikakulam were aggrieved with the state government for the imposition of a ban on *Podu* cultivation. Forcible capture of *Adivasi* land by a powerful politician-landlord nexus was another cause of their anger.

'While tracking up to the base camp of the revolutionaries located on a hill top, we came across a rural marketplace. All tribal men and women were roaming about in the market completely naked; only a small strip of tree-leaves slung around their waistline.'

'On being enquired, the local comrades accompanying us informed that the tribals lived deep inside the hill and come down to the market only once in a week to buy salt. That was their only requirement from the civilised world! Way up in the hill, the Communist revolutionaries had set up their base camps amidst the backward exploited tribes and were waging the armed rebellion against state machineries,' Sanyal recalled.

Sanyal and Sourin Bose spent 21 days at Srikakulam; they imparted elaborate training to the local rebels in operating arms–ammunitions and making explosives. They also conducted a number of political classes to instil Maoist Leninist Thoughts in them.

On returning from Srikakulam at the end of August, Sanyal once again focused on Naxalbari. By then mainly because of the disintegration of ground level activists, the agitation at Naxalbari was dwindling.

With a small group of comrades comprising Keshav Sarkar, Jangal Santhal, Shanti Munda, Deepak Biswas, Kadamlal Mullick and a few others, Sanyal was desperately struggling to keep the revolutionary flames alive. Six to seven months passed by without achieving any major goal.

Fearing a backlash from the state forces, the peasants and *Adivasi* tea workers did not return to the armed struggle. Ironic though, the situation outside Naxalbari was quite different; the *annihilation of class enemies* in the name of revolutionary tactic resulted in an anarchic situation in other parts of Bengal. Grenade attacks, shootouts and murders became a routine affair even in Calcutta.

A rebellion also broke out in the *Adivasi* dominated Midnapore district; young urban revolutionaries from Calcutta joined ranks with the rural peasantry and the other working populace.

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Ever since the formation of the CPI-ML, Charu Mazumdar was leading an underground life. He lodged in the houses of party workers in different parts of Calcutta. Enthused by the ever-growing rebellious activities, Mazumdar gave a call to party workers to *Turn the 1970s into a Decade of Liberation*. His written statement aggravated the anarchic situation further; students and young activists in several states of India plunged into action like never before.

Sniffing danger at the momentum that the rebellion was acquiring, the Government of India pledged to quell the menace with an iron hand. Both paramilitary and military troops were pressed into action. Areas dominated by Communist revolutionaries were notified as *disturbed areas*; this gave the state forces an extra-judicial power to tread the rebels at any cost.

The United Front government in West Bengal led by Ajoy Mukherjee of the Bangla Congress was dismissed on 19 March 1970; President's Rule was promulgated in Bengal for the second time in just two years. This gave the state forces a free hand and it let loose an all-out state-terror to counter the anarchic activities of the Communist rebels.

Indiscriminate killing of young revolutionaries on open streets and in police lockup became a routine. Police falsified such deaths as the result of encounters. Simultaneously, there came another setback for the Communist revolutionaries; disapproving the anarchy, the Peking Radio all of a sudden stopped airing all news and views on the Naxalbari Movement. This was a clear indication of China distancing itself from the CPI-ML.

Amidst this gloomy state of affairs, in April 1970, Charu Mazumdar convened a conference of the CPI-ML central organising committee in Calcutta. Being one of the 11 central organising committee members, Sanyal went to Calcutta to participate in the meet.

The conference ran for three days at a north Calcutta hideout. Sushital Roy Choudhury had prepared an organisational declaration and Charu Mazumdar proposed the political agenda for the party. But following a threadbare discussion, the house turned down both the proposals.

Instead, Satnarayan Singh, Shiv Kumar Mishra and Sourin Bose were asked to prepare a fresh organisational declaration. The task of finalising the political agenda was assigned to Sushital Roy Choudhury, R.P. Shroff and Saroj Dutta.

Both the groups completed the tasks in a fairly short period of time. The draft proposals prepared by them came up for discussion at the first CPI-ML party congress held at Garden Reach in Calcutta from 15 to 16 May 1970. Apart from the host state West Bengal, delegates from Tripura, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Jammu and Kashmir and Kerala attended the two-day party congress.

'In gist, the draft organisational declaration tabled in the party congress ratified the *annihilation of class enemies* as the prime task of all Communist revolutionaries. The *annihilation* would gradually lead to a guerrilla warfare and eventually to a peoples' war, the draft read. Furthermore, it stated in clear terms that the path followed by the CPC was the CPI-ML's path. China's chairman (Mao Tse-tung) was the party's chairman.'

'Participating in the discussion over the draft proposals, the leader of the Uttar Pradesh delegation, R.N. Upadhaya, severely criticised the suggestion that the *annihilation of class enemies* should be the central task. He also opposed the suggestion that the Chinese path was the only way forward for the Indian revolution.'

'*Such strategies would isolate the Communist revolutionaries from the Indian masses and turn them hostile*, he observed. But his criticisms were rejected by the party congress; the draft organisational proposal was ratified by majority votes,' Sanyal pointed out.

'The reality was that right from inception, internal democracy was non-existent in CPI-ML. The party functioned according to the whims and fancy of Charu *Da*. Quite often than not, he announced party programmes and activities without consulting any other central leadership. But there was none to oppose his capricious style of functioning. Being a minority voice, I also kept mum.'

'On the contrary, some of the central leaders were desperate to instate Charu *Da* as the ultimate authority in CPI-ML. Comrade Sourin Bose had in fact placed a resolution at the party congress to this effect. Though the resolution was not adopted on record, Charu *Da* gradually became a cult in the party. He was put above the party politburo and the central committee.'

'I remember an incident during the party congress; Charu *Da* and I were putting up in the house of a comrade in north Calcutta. One

day post-breakfast, I was getting ready to go out in the city; Charu *Da* was still relishing his bed tea. Without any immediate context, he suddenly mentioned that many of the comrades address him as the *great leader*; he sought to know what I thought of this.'

'I was completely at my wits end in discovering that Charu *Da* could ever think of his personal clout in a Communist party. Instead of dismaying him directly, I responded by saying that even if others referred to him as the *great leader*, he should advise them against this. For us, the party is above any individual, I told Charu *Da*,' recalled Sanyal.

On the concluding day of the first CPI-ML party congress, an 11-member politburo was formed. It included Kanu Sanyal, Charu Mazumdar, Sushital Roy Choudhury, Saroj Dutta, Sourin Bose, Satnarayan Singh, Shiv Kumar Mishra, R.P. Shroff, L. Appu and two representatives from Andhra Pradesh. Alongside the party congress, a secret meeting of the Communist intellectuals was also held in Calcutta.

'Speaking at the meet, Charu *Da* clearly stated that anyone who did not annihilate a class enemy lacked the moral authority to be identified as a Communist. Present in the meeting, I listened to his discourse in silence,' Sanyal recalled.

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On returning Siliguri after attending the party congress, Sanyal took shelter in a hideout at Nanujote Bairbusty village near Chouphukhuria and initiated a discussion with fellow comrades on organisational matters. Keshav Sarkar was the most prominent leader among the handfuls who belonged to the Sanyal camp.

In view of the all-out offensive launched by the state forces and a fast-depleting safe zone to manoeuvre, the group decided to establish an independent hideout-cum-activity centre at some other location away from Naxalbari. After much deliberation, a village in the neighbouring state of Bihar was selected for the purpose; the in-law's house of a leading activist was located in that village.

Keshav Sarkar was entrusted with the task of making a reconnaissance of the Bihar village. This was to verify if the hamlet would actually be suitable as a revolutionary hideout. Amidst this, Sanyal's personal life was struck by a sudden shocking development; his mother Nirmala died in Siliguri. This left him completely shattered and as a result, he withdrew from the party activities for the next few days.

'It was Lila *Di*, the wife Charu *Da*, who had passed on the news of my mother's death in a one-line communiqué; there was no information as to how she died or when the cremation would take place. The death of *Maa* completely devastated me; I lost interest in all sorts of activities and remained isolated from other comrades for the next four to five days.'

'The unfortunate part was that on the apprehension of being caught by police, I could not even attend my mother's cremation. That was more so because my *Mama*, maternal uncle, Haridas Bagchi was then posted in Siliguri as the District Intelligence Officer. The apprehension was that I being a prized catch for the police; *Mama* might exploit the opportunity to net me.'

'In fact, while attending *Maa*'s cremation, *Mama* had several times pestered my younger brother Prabir to know if I had been informed. He was very curious to know whether I would turn up at the cremation,' Sanyal recalled.

With Sanyal enmeshed in mourning the death of his mother, organisational activities came to a complete standstill; this being the situation at Naxalbari, negative feedbacks were also pouring in from other parts of the country. Pushed to the wall by the state repression, activists from Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh sent in a communiqué condemning the strategy of individual annihilation.

'The idea of establishing liberal zones by annihilating the class enemies is nothing but a utopian dream,' they wrote.

Similar sentiments were being expressed by the rebels from other parts of the country. *'Risking our lives, we have been carrying-out one annihilation after another; but instead facilitating a mass awakening this has scared the common people away from us. With no food and shelter, we have now become roving bands of feeble revolutionaries,'* wrote the activists from Midnapore in their SOS.

The agitations at Mushahari and Lakhimpur Kheri in Bihar were quelled even before this; majority of the activists there had either been killed by the state forces or were compelled to flee to other states to save their lives.

At Naxalbari, the revolutionaries led by Kanu Sanyal were dragging on in an extremely hostile situation. With the agitation having largely affected the paddy cultivation the previous season, villagers who sheltered them were no longer able to provide sufficient food. As a result,

the rebels were now compelled to survive on half meals. Also to evade the constant police patrolling across the villages, they were spending the daytime hiding under tea bushes.

'Soon there came a situation when even managing half a meal became difficult; we were now on the verge of starvation. With no other way out, I asked 10 of our ground-level activists to go to the nearby Bengdubi Army base and offer them menial labour in lieu of food. The Army authorities at Bengdubi were always in need of casual workers and they leaped the offer without raising a question about the identity of the workers.'

'This facilitated us the much needed breath that we were gasping for; the 10 activists would not only have their meals in the Army camp, at day-end they would also bring along the leftovers for us,' Sanyal said in recollection those troubled days.

Although the Bengdubi Army authorities were unsuspicious about the identity of the casual labourers they had employed, the police Intelligence soon got a wind of this. They began to monitor the movements of the activists.

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In the month of July, Keshav Sarkar went to Bihar on a reconnaissance tour for the proposed hideout and found the location suitable. Subsequently, the revolutionaries led by Kanu Sanyal began preparations for relocating to the new venue unaware of the fact that the police were cautiously zeroing in on them.

On 19 August 1970, playing a spoilsport to the Communist rebels' relocation plan, a large contingent of police and paramilitary troops nabbed Sanyal and 12 of his fellow activists from the Nanujote Bairbusty village hideout.

In all practical sense, that was the final assault on the Naxalbari agitation. The arrested revolutionaries were immediately sent to the Darjeeling Jail. With the dreams of a revolution fading out fast, leaders in the CPI-ML central committee began to raise their voice against the *annihilation line* of Charu Mazumdar.

In August 1970, Sushital Roy Choudhury, one of the prominent figures associated with the Naxalbari agitation right from the AICCCR days, penned an article questioning the strategies that were being

practiced. In the article titled *Bharatiya Biplaber Samashya O Sankat* or *The Problems of the Indian Revolution*, Roy Choudhury challenged the justification of burning down educational institutes, destroying statues of famous personalities and the indiscriminate murder of teachers, rival politicians and others. He alleged that the CPI-ML was inflicted with *Left adventurism* and if the malady was not treated at once, the very cause of the Indian revolution would suffer.

'Sushital Roy Choudhury submitted the article to Charu *Da*, demanding that it be placed before the CPI-ML central committee for a thorough debate. This however never happened; pro-Charu *Da* leaders suppressed the article alleging that it was anti-party,' Sanyal pointed out.

Instead, to re-establish the severed ties with the Chinese Communist Party, Charu Mazumdar now sent Sourin Bose to Peking as his special envoy. One of the main requirements that Charu *Da* sought from China was an independent radio station for dissemination of revolutionary ideas and news. Carrying his message, Bose repaired for the Communist Republic of China via London on 25 August 1970.

Back home, with the every passing day, the voice of dissent was growing stronger within the CPI-ML. In September, the Bihar state unit of the party led by politburo member Satnarayan Singh came up with a critical note, raising objections similar to those of Sushital Roy Choudhury. He too demanded an elaborate debate on his note in the party central committee.

This time, conceding to the demand, four politburo members—Charu Mazumdar, Saroj Dutta, Satnarayan Singh and Sushital Roy Choudhury—converged in Calcutta to discuss the matter. But in the course of the meeting, Mazumdar and Dutta outrightly rejected the criticisms.

Roy Choudhury was unceremoniously dropped as the president of the editorial board of CPI-ML's journal; he was not even given a chance to defend himself. That was the time the party began to fall apart, throwing up as many divisions as the number of leaders.

But as if facilitating a last glint before being snuffed out, the CPI-ML activists in West Dinajpur district exhibited a daring act in October. In the darkness of night, they raided a camp of the state home-guards at Magurjan village on the intersection of West Dinajpur and Darjeeling districts and looted five rifles.

The incident received wide news-coverage and invigorated by the sudden stimulus, Charu Mazumdar announced that *'the guerrilla warfare has started in Naxalbari afresh'*. Subsequent to Mazumdar's announcement, the CPI-ML activists, mostly educated urban youths, plunged into the annihilation of landlords in Birbhum, Murshidabad and the Santhal Parganas.

Over the next few months, young rebels killed several landlords and snatched some 126-odd firearms from the landlord gentry. Such isolated achievements gave Mazumdar and his followers yet another chance to reassert the *annihilation line*. They reiterated it to be the right path to revolution, whereas in reality, the CPI-ML was heading for a vertical split on this very issue.

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On 28 November 1970, after spending over two months in China, Sourin Bose returned from the Communist Republic empty handed. During his stay in China, Bose met Chou En-lai and Kang Sheing; he could not secure an audience with Mao Tse-tung.

Significantly, instead of winning back any assistance for setting up a radio station that Charu Mazumdar was wanting desperately, Bose returned with handful of criticisms. The criticisms were against Mazumdar's ideological standing and the anarchic activities of the CPI-ML under him.

Paying Mazumdar a visit at a Calcutta hideout, Bose briefly narrated him the main points of criticisms put forth by the CPC. On hearing them, an already unwell Mazumdar complained of uneasiness; Saroj Dutta, who was present on the occasion, advised Bose to submit his report later in writing.

But the gist of the CPC's criticisms that Mazumdar had heard by then, left him extremely disheartened; his health condition deteriorated overnight. To facilitate him some relief, at the advice of a doctor, Mazumdar was shifted to Puri in Orissa in December 1970. Wife Lila Mazumdar accompanied him in the sojourn.

With Mazumdar lodged in Puri, his ardent follower, Saroj Dutta, started giving instructions to party activists; many a times he did so even without consulting Mazumdar. But that could hardly counter the multi-pronged attack launched by the police and the rival political parties such as the CPI-M and the Congress.

The police were either shooting down those having the slightest inclination for a revolution or were putting them behind the bars. CPI-M and Congress cadres were instigating pogroms targeting the Communist rebels. On 6 March 1971, the police succeeded in arresting Sourin Bose; after Kanu Sanyal, he was the second politburo member of the CPI-ML to be arrested.

A week after Bose's arrest came another jolt for the CPI-ML; on 13 March, senior leader Sushital Roy Choudhury died of heart attack while in the hiding. Thus among the top CPI-ML leaders from West Bengal, only Charu Mazumdar and Saroj Dutta now remained out in the open.

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Amidst such a dismal state of affairs, Kanu Sanyal was shifted from Darjeeling to the Visakhapatnam Jail in Andhra Pradesh in connection with the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case. That was in the month of May 1971.

'While taking me to Andhra Pradesh, the Bengal police treated me like a dog. They tied me with a heavy chain and put me into a prison van that moved ahead with two more security vans guarding at the front and the rear. After plying non-stop from Darjeeling for an entire humid summer day, the convoy made the first halt at Beharampore police station in Murshidabad in the evening.'

'During the course of the long journey, I was not even offered a glass of water. At Beharampore, the guards brought me some food but I refused to eat saying that unless and until the chain was taken off me and I was allowed a shower, I would not eat. Neither the guards conceded my demands nor did I eat anything throughout the night. The journey resumed for Calcutta early next morning,' Sanyal narrated, his voice drowning in recollection of the hardships he had suffered.

They reached Calcutta by noon and Sanyal was kept in the lockup at New Market police station. There once again he made it clear that unless the shackles were removed and he was allowed to bathe, he would not eat anything. The bargain continued for several hours before the police finally gave in; late in the afternoon, Sanyal was allowed a shower at the police station. Following this, he ate his first meal in two days.

In the evening, Sanyal was taken to Howrah Station and boarded into the Madras Mail amidst tight security. The destination now is Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh. 'Security arrangement in the train was very elaborate; an entire compartment was booked for me with more than 50 armed police guarding round-the-clock,' Sanyal said.

They reached Visakhapatnam on the third day; Sanyal was straightway produced before a local court, which remanded him in jail custody at the Visakhapatnam Central Jail. Sanyal was lodged in a separate block in the jail, specially meant for the Naxalite prisoners hailing from Andhra Pradesh and other parts of the country.

'It was at Visakhapatnam where I saw an ocean for the first time in my life. After months of turbulence and exhaustion, the very first glance at the Bay of Bengal gave me a soothing feeling. Standing in front of the gigantic tides, I realised, how tiny we humans are,' recalled Sanyal.

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On the third day at Visakhapatnam Jail, Sanyal received an unexpected message from the authorities. He was told that another inmate of the jail was waiting to see him at the interview box.

On reaching there, Sanyal discovered that it was Sourin Bose, whom the junior party comrades used to call *Bhodu Da*. On being arrested in Calcutta, Bose too was shifted to Visakhapatnam in connection with the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case a few months before Sanyal.

'After exchanging formal greetings, we focused on the future course of action vis-à-vis the charges levelled against us. I had already made up my mind to seek defence against the charges, but *Bhodu Da* was still in dilemma. He was confused because of Charu *Da*'s standing instruction that none of the revolutionaries should ever opt for a defence in a court of law. Opting for a defence lawyer in court was a revisionist act, Charu *Da* believed.'

'I tried to convince *Bhodu Da* pointing out that Charu *Da*'s view was flawed. To back my argument, I made several references to Lenin, Stalin and also drew instances from the Chinese Revolution. Yet unable to make up his mind, *Bhodu Da* sought some more time to ponder on the issue,' Sanyal pointed out.

There were some 150-odd Naxalite prisoners lodged at the Visakhapatnam Jail. In addition to Sanyal and Sourin Bose, other stalwart Communist leaders lodged in the jail included Chowdary Tejeswararao, D. Nagabhushanam Patnaik, Kolla Venkayya and D. Bhuvana Mohana Patnaik. Like Bose, almost all of them were in dilemma on whether to opt for defence in the court. By then, in the absence of a defence counsel, despite there being lack of sufficient evidence, Tejeswararao was already convicted in a feeble case.

'Following a thorough counselling by me, most of them finally agreed to opt for defence against the charges levelled on them. There were however, still a sizeable number of Charu *Da*'s blind followers, who did not dodge. As a result, the Naxalite prisoners at Visakhapatnam Jail got divided into two camps: those in favour of seeking defence in court and those against it,' Sanyal recalled.

The rivalry gradually degraded into personal attacks; the followers of Charu Mazumdar began questioning the integrity and honesty of the pro-defence revolutionaries. Sanyal was on their main list of targets.

'The enmity stooped so low that instead of coming up with any logical argument in support of their conviction, Charu *Da*'s supporters began hurling slang and abusive languages at us. They also began calling us compradors. Thus, despite being arrested on the charges of being involved with the same movement, the face-off between the two factions became a routine affair in the jail,' Sanyal added.

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Back in West Bengal, the President's Rule was withdrawn on 2 April 1971 and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh became the new Chief Minister of a coalition government headed by the Congress. But the new government too lasted barely for two and a half months. On 28 June 1971, the President's Rule was again imposed on Bengal.

Meanwhile, the intra-party crisis in CPI-ML began spiralling out at the ground level as well. After sending some ruffles for nearly eight months, the agitations in Birbhum, Murshidabad and the Santhal Parganas had begun to fade out starting March 1971. There were no landlords left in these areas; many of them were killed by the rebels, others had fled to safety in places such as Calcutta.

Thus, the Communist rebels in those three districts were left with no other agenda to implement; this inflicted them with a sense of laxity and disintegration. Seizing this opportunity, in July 1971, the Centre pressed in a huge contingent of paramilitary troops into the troubled zones. Equipped with sophisticated firearms, the paramilitary troops smashed the remains of the agitation with very little or no resistance at all.

Not very long after this, on the night of 4 August, the Calcutta Police nabbed Saroj Dutta. The cops took him to the *Maidan* and riddled him down with bullets; the incident was later projected as an encounter.

Taking the organisational crisis to its climax, in November 1971, the CPI-ML politburo member from Bihar, Satnarayan Singh, convened a meeting of the party's central committee in his home state. Of the handful of West Bengal central committee members still eluding the police—Charu Mazumdar and Suniti Ghosh took no interest in attending the meeting; Ashim Chatterjee fell in the police net midway.

Among the remaining CPI-ML central committee members hailing from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttar Pradesh, most were either in jail or had been killed by the police. Hence, the central committee meeting convened by Satnarayan Singh was only attended by two members from Bihar and one each from Punjab and UP.

In that meeting, holding the *annihilation line* responsible for the disaster in CPI-ML, Charu Mazumdar and his follower comrades were suspended from the party unilaterally. Satnarayan Singh became the new general secretary of the CPI-ML.

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In February 1972, amidst a chaotic and volatile socio-political ambience, election was announced for the West Bengal Assembly. In the election that was marked by large-scale rigging and political violence, the Congress returned to power with a thumping majority.

On 19 March 1972, young barrister-turned-politician, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, assumed the seat of the Chief Minister of Bengal. Under Ray's stewardship, the state machineries carried forward the offensive on the Naxalites more vigorously than before.

In June 1972, in the aftermath of Charu Mazumdar's *expulsion* from the CPI-ML, a group of six prominent under-trial Naxalite leaders lodged at the Visakhapatnam Jail issued an open letter. The six leaders were—Kanu Sanyal, Sourin Bose, Chowdary Tejeswararao, D. Nagabhushanam Patnaik, Kolla Venkayya and D. Bhuvana Mohana Patnaik.

In that letter, they cited the criticisms put forth by the Chinese Communist Party and accused Charu Mazumdar of being inflicted with Left adventurism. Clarifying that they were not aligning with any faction or group in the CPI-ML, the six leaders urged party cadres and sympathisers to make an independent review of the Naxalbari agitation. Only after a review, the people should decide on the future course of action, vis-à-vis the *liberation* of India, they wrote.

'The letter was the outcome of an eight-day long review meeting that we held in the jail campus about Naxalbari Movement. Following an in-depth analysis, the rest of the comrades had entrusted me with the task of penning the open letter. I drafted the letter in Bengali; *Bhodu Da* later translated it to English.'

'The intent behind writing the open letter was to make the field-level workers and the general public aware of our disapproval of the strategy of *individual annihilation*. Our aim was to save the dream of Indian revolution from the clutches of Left adventurism. The letter was smuggled out from Visakhapatnam Jail by my younger brother, Prabir, who used to often visit me by travelling all the way from Bengal.'

'I had asked my brother to hand it over to our fellow comrades for publication in all pro-Naxalite journals. But unfortunately, the letter did not get enough public exposure as we had desired,' Sanyal pointed out.

Even after hearing about his expulsion from the CPI-ML by the central committee and the open letter issued by the six jailed leaders, Charu Mazumdar did not attach much importance to these developments. But as if partially conceding to the criticisms, beginning early 1972 he began to reframe some of his statements issued earlier. He had by then returned to Calcutta from Puri.

Of all the major course corrections announced by Mazumdar, the most remarkable was the announcement that the revolutionaries should not limit their activities only to the *annihilation* of class enemies.

'In the given circumstance, sticking only to the annihilation agenda is nothing but mere economism. The landless and the poor peasantry will have to be educated in arms loot tactics and guerilla warfare, which would eventually lead to the birth of a peoples' militia. This is the 'mass line' we must follow right now,' Mazumdar instructed his followers.

But that was too little too late; the agitation was already on the decline. Other than a handful of young and inexperienced rebellious operatives, there was hardly any leading revolutionary left to steer the movement out of the crisis. The dream of a revolution was falling apart like a dying firework.

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The last symbolic assault on the Naxalite agitation came on 16 July 1972; the police arrested Charu Mazumdar from a hideout in Calcutta. For the next 12 days, a chronic heart patient Mazumdar was subjected to rigorous grilling by the police and the Intelligence officials at the Lalbazar police headquarters. Unable to withstand the torture, the Naxalbari ideologue succumbed in the police lockup on 28 July 1972.

The death of Charu Mazumdar evoked widespread protests across West Bengal. It also facilitated a reconciliation ground for the two warring Naxalite factions lodged at Visakhapatnam Jail. With both factions preparing separately to pay homage to the departed ideologue, Kolla Venkayya, the senior-most comrade lodged in the jail, approached Sanyal proposing a joint condolence meet instead.

Sanyal initially opposed the idea pointing out that the loyalists of Charu Mazumdar would not allow him to present his assessment of the Naxalite agitation and this would only aggravate the rift further. But Venkayya promised nothing of that sort would happen and everyone would be able to place his/her views. On this assurance, Sanyal finally agreed to hold a joint condolence ceremony for Mazumdar.

Two to three days later, a joint condolence meeting in remembrance of Charu Mazumdar was organised at the Visakhapatnam Jail; some 150-odd Naxalite prisoners assembled on the occasion.

'Speaking at the condolence meet, I appreciated the noble qualities that Charu *Da* had. But at the same time, I pointed out the mistakes he had committed as regards the call for individual annihilation and

negating the role of mass organisations in building up a Communist revolution. I restricted my speech strictly to political criticisms and there was no personal attack aimed at Charu *Da*.'

'But as I had anticipated, in the middle of my speech, the followers of Charu *Da* began raising objections. Their logic: no criticisms of Charu *Da*'s political strategy would be entertained as he was dead now. The objection soon took a chaotic turn; peeved at this, I left the meeting saying *To hell with your Charu Mazumdar*,' Sanyal recalled.

The development marred the prospects of reconciliation between the two Naxalite factions. The rivalry instead began to aggravate by the every passing day. During the hearing of the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case in the Court of Additional Sessions Judge at Visakhapatnam, members of the two factions clashed, bringing the court proceedings to a halt.

'From the very beginning, we the Naxalite prisoners had adopted a strategy to make people aware of our politics and struggle. Hence during every court hearing, standing on the production box, we used to hum revolutionary songs and deliver lectures about our politics. It was only after the songs and lecturing, the judge used to be allowed to initiate the proceedings.'

'The followers of Charu *Da* started misusing the opportunity; under the veil of lectures, they began to hurl scathing personal abuses at us. With the trend surpassing the level of civilised political discourse, I held a discussion with comrades in our group and asked them to respond to the abuses in a befitting manner.'

'During the next hearing when Charu *Da*'s followers launched the verbal abuse on us, our comrades plunged over them right in front of the judge. Dusi Appalaswamy, a comrade from our group, snatched the court guard's rifle and targeted it on the rival group. Cowered by this, the members of our rival group hid behind the judge. Finally, it was the judge who calmed us down through much persuasion and averted a bloodbath.'

'We told the judge that none of the rival under-trials would be spared next time if they indulged in some abusive discourse ever again. We also announced that when they return to the jail in the afternoon, we would administer them some more treatment. Interestingly, the

rival group who were calling for our heads till the other day, became so scared by the threat that on returning to the jail they did not even enter the Naxalite ward. Instead, by appealing to the jail authorities, they relocated to the common ward meant for regular criminals,' Sanyal pointed out.

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Supplementing the open letter issued in 1972, Sanyal penned an article on the Naxalbari Movement in April 1973. Titled *Naxalbari Somporke Aaro Thathya, More About Naxalbari*, the 13-page article presented a brief post-mortem of the background, progress and the cause of the abrupt disintegration of the Naxalbari agitation.

In the write-up, Sanyal carried out a scathing attack on the political outlook of Charu Mazumdar. He accused Mazumdar of ill-utilising the Naxalbari struggle to disseminate his own *flawed strategies*. Sanyal also held him primarily responsible for ruining the first bout of the Naxalbari Movement. That was the first time Sanyal spoke out so boldly against the political acumen of his one-time mentor.

This article too was smuggled out from the Visakhapatnam Jail by his younger brother, Prabir. Eventually, it made it to the print in a number of Naxalite journals published from West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh.

'But my inability to speak up against Charu *Da*'s flawed politics at the appropriate time would remain as the greatest lament of life. Had I done this before, the Communist Movement in India would not have been in such a divided state as it is today.'

'So far as my understanding of Charu *Da*'s psyche is concerned, he was not entirely whimsical. Rather, despite being sworn into Communism, he could never overcome the traits of the upper-class *Zamindar* nobility to which he originally belonged. He was always desperate to leave his individual mark on the pages of his times,' Sanyal observed.

Apart from condemning Mazumdar's policies, *More About Naxalbari* also took a fresh approach to the revolutionary movement in India. It called for the unity of all sections and sub-sections of the CPI-ML and urged them to draw lessons from the mistakes of the past.

With most of the frontline leaders cornered by the severe state repression, the appeal did not yield any immediate result. But on a smaller scale, the warring Naxalite factions lodged at Visakhapatnam

Jail buried the hatchet, at least for the time being. As a result, the pro-Charu Mazumdar faction, which had shifted to the regular jail ward returned to the association ward meant for Naxalite prisoners.

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After the death of Charu Mazumdar, on the face of a severe state repression unleashed by the Government of India, whatever little organisation was left of the CPI-ML collapsed completely.

Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, identified the Naxalite Movement as the greatest danger for the country and resolved to fight it to finish. Carrying forward the Prime Ministerial resolve, the Centre continued with the well-consorted repression of the Naxalite cadres across India. By 1973, the number of Naxalite activists and supporters held in different jails in India swelled to nearly 32,000.

Inside the jail, the activists were subjected to third-degree torture often turning them into living dead. As the news of such inhuman torture on the Naxalite prisoners spread, some 300-odd academics from across the globe signed a letter registering their protest over the violation of prison rules. They sent the communiqué to the Government of India on 15 August 1974. Prominent among the signatories were Noam Chomsky from the United States and Simone de Beauvoir from France.

Amnesty International soon followed suit and within a month released a report condemning the treatment being meted out to the Naxalites. The report detailed the cases of illegal detentions and torture on the Naxalite prisoners in several jails across India.

Sanyal and his fellow Naxalites lodged at the Visakhapatnam Jail were, however, getting a comparatively fair treatment.

'The jail block meant for us was known as the *association ward*. Though located in the same premises, the block was completely separated from the regular wards by an internal wall. There were five cells in our ward, each measuring about four feet in breadth and having a ventilator at the tail end of each cell. In front of the cells was a long running veranda.'

'During day hours, the jail authorities would keep the cells open, allowing us to come out on the veranda. We were permitted to sit on the veranda, chat with each other and read newspapers. Among the

English newspapers that we used to get include *The Times of India* and *The Hindustan Times*.'

'Practically speaking, it was there at the Visakhapatnam Jail that I got a chance to read newspapers freely. We were allowed to stroll in the jail compound during the day hours, but by dusk we had to return to the confines of the narrow prison cells. I had established a rapport with the jail superintendent and following my appeal, he gave us a volleyball to play in the afternoon,' Sanyal pointed out.

From Sanyal's family, in addition to brother Prabir, his younger sister Usha and her husband Amal Choudhury used to come to the jail to meet him. While Prabir paid a visit once in every quarter, others would come once in a year. There was a Calcutta-based elder cousin of Sanyal, who never visited him in the jail but used to send him 100 rupees every month by money order.

Since there was no practice of serving tea to the inmates at Visakhapatnam Jail, Sanyal aptly utilised the financial assistance in making their own arrangements for tea. The balance amount would go into purchasing books and journals.

'Contrary to the general reaction of people lodged in prison, to me the jail term was more or less a refreshing episode. There were two reasons behind this: first, jail was nothing new to me; starting in 1949, I had been frequenting various jails at regular intervals. And secondly, it was at the Visakhapatnam Jail that I started venting out my criticisms about Charu *Da*'s flawed policies and this helped me to assert my own identity independent of Charu *Da*'s shadow. I was keeping very busy in the task of disinfecting fellow comrades from the infliction of Left adventurism,' observed Sanyal.

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The plea by renowned academicians and human rights activists in India and abroad to put an end to the plight of jailed Naxalites fell into deaf ears. Instead of redressing the issue, snubbing all humanitarian cry, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a National Emergency in India on 26 June 1975. Subsequently, strict censorship was imposed on the publication of anti-government news and views.

Embargo was also imposed across India on mass demonstrations and protests; scores of anti-Congress politicians belonging to the

Left, Right and the Centrist camps were put behind the bars citing national interest. The first-of-its-kind National Emergency invoked in post-Independent India choked up all avenues of democratic protests. This time round it was not only the Naxalites who were at the receiving end; the fundamental rights and liberties of the common citizens were also infringed upon.

Notwithstanding the repression, the Andhra Pradesh Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (APCCCR) led by T. Nagi Reddy was trying to regroup the Naxalbari revolutionaries. Although Nagi Reddy had parted ways with the CPI-M in 1968 on the question of revisionism, he never backed the CPI-ML's call for election boycott. Also he did not support undermining the role of mass organisations in materialising a revolution. Although Sanyal was on the same page with APCCCR on most of the issues, he was unaware of this until then.

'The jail term in Andhra Pradesh had offered me the opportunity to get a wholesome idea of the Communist Movement in India. It allowed me to stitch the various events of the past into a comprehensive perspective. Before coming to Visakhapatnam, I was under the impression that majority of the anti-revisionist Communist leaders in India were in conformity with the strategies of Charu Mazumdar and that was the prime reason, why I never ever dared to challenge his strategies in public.'

'Being enmeshed in agitation at the ground level, my movement was limited to the battle zones of Naxalbari; I hardly had the opportunity to meet the leaders from other states who visited Siliguri or Calcutta during the Naxalbari uprising. Because of the same reason, the leaders from Andhra and other states always considered me to be an ardent lieutenant of Charu Mazumdar,' Sanyal pointed out.

T. Nagi Reddy approached Sanyal, requesting him to join the APCCCR. By then, Chowdary Tejeswararao had secretly aligned with the APCCCR from Visakhapatnam Jail. Yet, Sanyal chose not to follow suit and replied that he would consider the proposal only if he ever gets out of the confines of the jail.

Instead he gave Nagi Reddy the names and contacts of his follower comrades in northern West Bengal, who might be inclined to join the APCCCR. Sanyal also urged Nagi Reddy to form a pan-Andhra

defence committee to handle the cases pending against the jailed Naxalites. Reddy obliged the suggestion and appointed defence counsels for Naxalite prisoners in all the pending cases.

Advocates S.V.L. Narasimham, K. Ramkrishnareddi and P.L. Naidu were appointed to defend the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case in which Sanyal and Sourin Bose were two prime accused among a long list of 75 individuals. Hearing into the case continued for over a year and the designated court finally delivered its verdict on 30 August 1976.

Despite there being a number of vital loopholes in the prosecution's case, the Visakhapatnam Additional Sessions and District Judge (II), C. Veerabhadra Rao declared all the 75 accused guilty of waging an armed rebellion against the state, indulging in murders and loots, etc.

'Interestingly, before announcing the verdict, the judge summoned *Bhodu Da* and me to his chamber. He praised us for our sober conduct during the trial but citing the so-called indirect constraints clamped upon by the Union government and the National Emergency, the judge lamented, he had no other option but to award them a tough sentence,' recalled Sanyal.

Both Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose were sentenced to life imprisonment under Sections 120-B and 121, read with Sections 302, 395 and 396 of the Indian Penal Code. The sentence was further sufficed by short imprisonments under Sections 121-A and 124-A of the Penal Code.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kanu Sanyal, Sourin Bose and 12 of the others convicted in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case to life imprisonment filed an appeal before the High Court of Hyderabad. They challenged the 30 August 1976 verdict passed by the Visakhapatnam court. Hyderabad High Court admitted the appeal and fixed the hearing for a later date.

Close on this, Sanyal and his comrades sent a *habeas corpus* application to the Calcutta High Court by registered post. They urged that they should be produced in the respective courts in West Bengal during the hearing into each and every case pending against them in Bengal.

'There were 14 cases pending against me in West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Tripura and Delhi. Funny enough, the *habeas corpus* application that we had sent addressing it to the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court returned undelivered. Postal department sent us back the letter to Visakhapatnam Jail by putting an "addressee not fund stamp" on it.'

'But the utter incompetence of the postal department did us a favour; now we sent a *habeas corpus* application directly to the Supreme Court of India, enclosing with it the undelivered post that we had sent to the Calcutta High Court. In the application, I also made an appeal to the Supreme Court to allow me to defend my own case.'

'The apex court responded within a fortnight and intimated that our *habeas corpus* petition had been admitted for hearing. The court, however, turned down my appeal for defending my own case and wrote that a defence counsel would be appointed for me at government expense,' Sanyal recalled.

The Supreme Court's admitting the *habeas corpus* came as a boon for the Naxalites. In the subsequent hearing, barring three cases, the top court quashed all other litigations pending against Kanu Sanyal and his comrades across the states of India. The three cases that remained active were: (1) the Calcutta Conspiracy Case, (2) a case in Delhi pertaining to inflammatory writings and (3) the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case. In the last case, the rebels had already filed an appeal before the High Court of Hyderabad.

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Two months later, in November 1976, Sanyal, Sourin Bose and a few of their comrades were relocated from Visakhapatnam Jail to the Alipore Central Jail in Calcutta. The relocation was effected to facilitate their production in a local court in connection with the hearing into the Calcutta Conspiracy Case.

In their first month at the Alipore Central Jail, they were lodged in the 'Condemned Cell' exclusively meant for prisoners sentenced to death penalty and were shifted to a separate jail block later.

'Krishna Singh Moktan of Kurseong was then the superintendent of Alipore Central Jail. Moktan was my contemporary and we used to know each other since my school days. He allotted *Bhodu Da* and me two adjoining cells located on the first floor of a special block that was detached from the regular wards.'

'On the ground floor of the same jail block was lodged comrade Ashim Chatterjee; in the block next to it were comrade Jangal Santhal and Mahadeb Mukherjee. There were several other young Naxalite cadres lodged in the Alipore Jail. Like us, Ashim and Jangal were also opposed to Charu *Da*'s *annihilation line*, but Mahadeb Mukherjee was one of his diehard followers,' Sanyal pointed out.

Akin to the followers of Charu Mazumdar at Visakhapatnam Jail, Mukherjee too was in the practice of hurling verbal abuse at the rival faction; he used to brand them as *deserters* of the revolution.

'But upon my arrival at Alipore Jail, I soon silenced Mukherjee by employing the same tactic that I had applied at Visakhapatnam. One day as Mukherjee was carrying on with his abuse-spree in court, under my instruction, Jangal plunged over him and roughed him up severely. After that day, Mukherjee never ever indulged in badmouthing against us,' recalled Sanyal.

Making the most out of the stay at Alipore Central Jail, Sanyal began interacting with the young Naxalites lodged in the same prison. Among them were the ones accused in the murder of Forward Bloc leader Hemanta Bose. Holding regular interactions, Sanyal was trying to persuade the youths to abandon the *annihilation line* of Charu Mazumdar.

Sourin Bose, however, was not in favour of such factionalism inside the jail; he advised Sanyal to refrain from holding any political discussions while in the jail. With Sanyal showing no sign of relenting, Bose stopped interacting with him to register his protest.

'It so happened that *Bhodu Da* and I would sit side by side, have tea or lunch and yet he would not converse a single word with me. Despite this, I kept on approaching him time and again,' Sanyal recalled.

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The National Emergency clamped on India on 26 June 1975 resulted in a political stagnancy in the country, but it succeeded in facilitating a forced economic growth. Misconstruing the political stagnancy for stability and the forced economic growth for real, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi called for general elections in India in early 1977. Mrs Gandhi was overly confident of thumping back to power in the world's largest democracy that she had been teaching discipline over the past 21 months.

The nation-wide polls were scheduled for 16 to 20 of March. On behalf of the CPI-ML, Satnarayan Singh called for a poll boycott. The announcement compelled Sourin Bose and Kanu Sanyal to resume their interaction; they got into discussion to take a call on the issue. Ashim Chatterjee and Jangal Santhal also joined in.

'Following an in-depth deliberation, we decided not to support the poll boycott call. Instead, to make our presence felt, we resolved to use the election as a tactical move. There were two considerations

behind this: first, according to Lenin, Communists must make use of all forms of struggle to further the goal of revolution; and secondly, it was for the first time that all political formations opposed to Indira Gandhi had come together, in turn throwing up a bright prospect of defeating the draconian government led by her.'

'We prepared an eight-page appeal urging all revolutionary Communists and supporters to participate in the polls. We also requested them to vote against the Congress party led by Indira Gandhi; Sourin Bose and I were the joint signatories of the appeal that was made available to the media,' Sanyal pointed out.

The news appeared very prominently the next day in all the major dailies published from Calcutta because the development was indicative of a major policy shift in the Naxalite camp. Post-1967, the Naxalites had been boycotting each and every election: be it the state Assembly poll or the Lok Sabha election.

The announcement triggered a buzz all across; anonymous letters addressed to Kanu Sanyal started pouring in at the Alipore Central Jail. They applauded Sanyal for rejecting the poll boycott call. But Satnarayan Singh did not budge from his stand and remained firm on the call for election boycott.

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Raking up Indira Gandhi from her reverie, 320 million voters of India punished her for mutilating the Constitution and imposing a National Emergency in the country. The poll results declared on 23 March 1977 saw the Congress being miserably defeated by the rival political alliance led by the Janata Party. On top of all, Mrs Gandhi herself stood defeated from the Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh.

'On the day of the results, the Alipore Jail authorities had installed a number of microphones inside the campus to let the inmates listen to radio bulletins. With the news of the Congress' rout pouring in, all the prisoners—be it the political prisoners or petty criminals—plunged into celebrations. It was because, a change of guard in the government always used to generate the hope among prisoners of being released on compassionate grounds,' recalled Sanyal.

On 24 March 1977, a new government led by the Janata Party was sworn in at the Centre. Morarji Desai became the Prime Minister in

the first-ever non-Congress government in India; Choudhury Charan Singh was made the Home Minister. Shortly after the formation of the government, Charan Singh initiated a reconciliation process with the Naxalites; he offered to withdraw all the pending cases if the rebels give a written pledge about deserting the armed struggle. The CPI-ML general secretary Satnarayan Singh, who had earlier called for a poll boycott, lapped over the proposal. But Charan Singh insisted that all the top-ranked Naxalite leaders would have to sign a similar pledge.

To facilitate this, a few months later, Kanu Sanyal, Sourin Bose, Ashim Chatterjee, Jangal Santhal, Santosh Rana and Mihir Rana were flown to New Delhi. They were taken to New Delhi on the pretext of producing them at the Tis Hazari Court for hearing into a case pertaining to inflammatory writings against the Indian union.

'We were taken by air; that was my first visit to Delhi. They lodged us in Tihar Jail and upon being briefed about the actual purpose of bringing us to Delhi; Sourin Bose, Ashim Chatterjee, Jangal Santhal and I outrightly refused to sign any such undertaking. But Santosh Rana and Mihir Rana gave in.'

'Acting as the emissary of Charan Singh, president of the People's Union for Civil Liberties and Democratic Rights (PUCL), Krishan Kant, tried to convince us on the issue, but could not change our mind. Meanwhile following our deposition, the Tis Hazari Court dismissed all charges levelled against us in the case of inflammatory writings,' Sanyal pointed out.

After a week at Tihar Jail, Sanyal and the fellow comrades were brought back to the Alipore Central Jail. Sanyal and Sourin Bose now had only two cases pending against them: the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case and the Calcutta Conspiracy Case.

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In June 1977, close on the heels of the Congress' rout in the Lok Sabha polls, election was held to the state Assembly in West Bengal. Riding on the strong anti-Indira wave, the Opposition Left Front headed by the CPI-M came to power in Bengal with an absolute majority; Jyoti Basu became the Chief Minister of the new government on 23 June.

One of the agendas on which the CPI-M had fought the Assembly poll was the unconditional release of all political prisoners in the

state, including the Naxalites. Thus shortly after thumping to power, the Left Front government kick started the process by releasing Jangal Santhal from the Alipore Central Jail. The next man to be released was Ashim Chatterjee, which was followed by the release of several others.

On being released from jail, majority of the Naxalites opted for a rehabilitation package offered by the state government. The Left Front government offered the former rebels with bus permits, licence for ration shops, loan to start business and so on.

Sanyal and Sourin Bose, however, continued to languish behind the bars. That was because they had already been sentenced in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case and were fighting an appeal against the conviction; dropping the Calcutta Conspiracy Case at this point would require them to go back to Andhra Pradesh again to serve the jail term in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case.

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In November 1977, Sanyal and his comrades received an encouraging piece of news from Hyderabad. Their advocate informed that in the absence of any tangible evidence, the Hyderabad High Court has quashed the verdict of the lower court in Srikakulam Conspiracy Case and they have been acquitted of all charges.

The legal hassle, however, was not over yet, the advocate wrote; the government of Andhra Pradesh has appealed in the Supreme Court challenging the acquittal of the Naxalites. Consequent to this, Sanyal and Sourin Bose spent the entire 1978 awaiting the decision of the Supreme Court, while hearings into the Calcutta Conspiracy Case also continued.

Lodged in the Alipore Central Jail, Sanyal was getting dismayed over the developments. Finally, in April 1979, the prolonged wait came to an end; the Supreme Court upheld the Hyderabad High Court's ruling and acquitted Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case.

Barely a week after this, the Left Front government in West Bengal withdrew all charges pending against them in the Calcutta Conspiracy Case. Subsequent to this, on 7 May 1979, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose were freed from the Alipore Central Jail.

'On the day of our release, RSP leader Debabrata Bandhopadhaya who was a minister in the state Cabinet had personally come to the Alipore Jail gate to receive us. There was a huge crowd of general public and media personnel; the kind of welcome we received on stepping out was quite unexpected to me,' Sanyal observed.

Coming out of the jail, Sourin Bose went to his in-laws house in Calcutta and Sanyal to his elder cousin's house located at Edward Court on Jawaharlal Nehru Road in the city.

'My cousin was an affluent man and his standard of living was quite lavish. The cot that they allotted me was padded with a think-soft mattress, whereas I have been used to sleeping on the floor all my life. One might find this funny, but as a result, I could not sleep through the entire night; it felt like as if I was sinking in the bed,' Sanyal laughed.

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Returning to Siliguri, Sanyal straightway went to Sebdella Jote village at Hatighisha near Naxalbari. Sebdella Jote had been a shelter to him since 1951–52; it was almost after nine years that he had now returned to the village. He found accommodation in the house of comrade Keshav Sarkar, next to which lived fellow activist Jangal Santhal and his family.

'Keshav's hutment consisted of only one room covered with a hay roof. In that one room, Keshav, his wife Shanti Munda and their children used to stack themselves together. Shanti Munda has been one of our active comrades since the days of the Naxalbari Movement.'

'On my arrival, they moved to the farthest corner of the small mud-dwelling, I slept in the same room beside the door. Furniture was beyond the farthest of our imagination, we all used to sleep on the floor with sacks stuffed with dry stalks making up for the mattress,' recalled Sanyal.

From this very hutment, Sanyal once again plunged into organisational activities. To rejuvenate the support base, he convened a peasants' conference at Sebdella Jote in the first week of October 1979.

'The primary goal was to share the achievements of Naxalbari agitation and also to analyse the mistakes that we had committed. We were also to decide on our future course of action. Significantly, even in the absence of adequate publicity, some 1,500-odd farmers-activists

turned up at the conference. I was extremely overwhelmed by the huge response but only to be grounded later.'

'The turnout was the result of a rumour that I was going to join the CPI-M and many people considered it a good proposition to side with me to gain advantages from the state government,' Sanyal pointed out.

Despite the sizeable gathering, the conference ultimately could not be held as a sudden downpour wreaked havoc at the venue; the event was rescheduled to a later date.

On the second occasion, the conference drew only about 150 peasants and activists.

'They were the ones I had been associated with since 1952; the others with utilitarian views had got deterred by my ruling out the possibility of joining the CPI-M and did not feel encouraged to turn up. We discussed the first bout of the Naxalbari Movement at length and decided to carry forward the struggle. We set two targets. One, to fight the revisionism of the CPI-M and two, to strive against the Left adventurism being practiced by a section of the revolutionary Communists,' Sanyal said.

Prior to Sanyal's release from jail, like-minded comrades had floated a new organisation called the Organising Committee for the Coordination of Communist Revolutionaries (OCCCR). Sanyal took over the reins of OCCCR and plunged into action to bring in more revolutionaries under its umbrella.

To achieve the goal, he embarked on an extensive tour of the southern Bengal districts and held several meetings with disgruntled workers of both the CPI-M and the CPI-ML. With the help of fellow leaders such as B.S. Dewan and R.B. Khatiwara, Sanyal also began to reorganise the tea workers and peasants of Darjeeling hills. Subsequent to this, they succeeded in forming trade unions in five tea gardens in Kurseong, Ghoom and the Tindharia localities; a section of farmers in Kalimpong also came into the OCCCR fold.

'My prime target was to unify all the Communist revolutionaries in India and take forward the Indian Communist Movement, which had suffered a major disintegration post-1970. Sections of the revolutionaries from Andhra Pradesh led by T. Nagi Reddy and D.V. Rao were backing me in this endeavour,' recalled Sanyal.

Sanyal's relentless effort culminated in the first West Bengal conference of the OCCCR held at Muragacha in Nadia district in February 1980. Following an elaborate discussion, the conference re-christened OCCCR to the Organising Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (OCCR). A state committee was also formed with Sanyal in the lead.

'The immediate agenda for OCCR was to strive for the unity of all Naxalite factions operating under different nomenclatures. It was however excluding the groups pursuing the Charu Mazumdar line; it was deemed futile to talk to them as they were adamant to carry forward the *annihilation line* and belittled the utility of mass organisations,' Sanyal observed.

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Over the next seven months, OCCR succeeded to penetrate roots in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, West Dinajpur and Malda in northern Bengal. In southern Bengal, the organisation formed bases in 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Nadia and Midnapur. In addition to this, the OCCR received an invitation from the Communist revolutionaries of Vaishali in neighbouring Bihar.

'That was the first time that OCCR was stepping out of Bengal. On the request of local comrades, I went to Vaishali and travelled extensively through several parts of Bihar. We succeeded to establish branch units at Vaishali, Purnia, Patna and in two to three other districts. Subsequent to this, a Bihar state organising committee of the OCCR was formed by drawing representatives from the district units,' Sanyal continued.

A few months into this, a section of Communists from Uttar Pradesh led by veteran leader Mahesh Nigam expressed interest in joining the OCCR; they invited Sanyal on a tour of UP. But Sanyal fell ill just before embarking on the tour; he was diagnosed with a severe malady in the gall bladder. That was in late 1980.

Sanyal was admitted to the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri and underwent a gall bladder surgery in the government facility. After spending nearly two months in the hospital, a frail Sanyal found accommodation in the house of younger brother Prabir at Babupara in Siliguri.

After lodging there for a month, he relocated to the house of younger sister Usha Choudhury at Birpara in the Dooars. Upon recuperation, he swung back to political activity in February 1981.

'During my days at the Visakhapatnam Jail, I used to share a warm relationship with T. Nagi Reddy and D.V. Rao. They had urged me to join them in the Andhra Pradesh Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (APCCCR). With Nagi Reddy being dead, Rao was now heading the APCCCR.'

'Taking cue from the Visakhapatnam days, I approached Rao proposing a unification of the OCCR and the APCCCR. I invited him to Calcutta for finalising the modalities. But during the discussions held at Howrah, differences cropped up between us on the question of our approach towards the Indian bourgeoisie.'

'APCCCR was of the view that the character of the Indian bourgeoisie was no different from their international counterparts and hence the entire bourgeoisie must be treated as imperialist compradors. On the contrary, we believed that the Indian bourgeoisie could not be viewed with the same tinted glass like their international counterparts. Rather, we proposed tagging them as compradors in nature, less harmful than the absolute compradors.'

'The difference snowballed into a major controversy and with D.V. Rao ruling out a scope for negotiation on the issue, the unification move between the OCCR and the APCCCR fell apart,' Sanyal pointed out.

In subsequent developments, the APCCCR split into several small factions, with some of them showing leanings towards the OCCR. The Bolshevik Party of India in Kerala led by Jose Abraham and K.P.R. Gopalan, also expressed solidarity with the OCCR. Similar vibes were coming from Karnataka as well.

Consequent to this, in May 1981, the OCCR convened its first all India conference at the Subrati Sangha Ground at Naxalbari. Delegates from West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka participated in the weeklong conference. The conference concluded with the formation of a Central Committee of the OCCR; Sanyal was made the central general secretary.

'Much beyond our expectations, around 5,000 ground-level supporters from Terai and elsewhere in northern Bengal had turned up

at the open session. Post the Naxalbari uprising, that was the biggest ever gathering of the Communist revolutionaries. The overwhelming response infused a renewed vigour in us,' recalled Sanyal.

The dream of uniting the Communist revolutionaries, however, did not materialise yet; there remained a number of smaller factions working separately in different parts of India. For the greater cause of a Communist revolution, the prime task before Sanyal was to bring all those factions under one single umbrella. It was indeed a Herculean task as these factions were not only divided over ideological or policy issues; trivial matters such as individual control over such factions were also hindering the unity.

By 1984, the ceaseless efforts of Sanyal and his fellow comrades succeeded to create a favourable atmosphere for consultations and negotiations among 17 different factions of the Communist revolutionaries in India. Later that year, leaders of those 17 factions assembled for a secret meeting at Bangalore to weigh the possibility of unification. As a precondition to the unification move, they decided not to adopt any resolution unless it was unanimous. Even a single voice of dissent would be counted, they resolved.

The meet concluded by forming a five-member unification committee with Sanyal as the convener. All the 17 factions were asked to submit their ideological positions to the committee within a fixed timeframe.

'But that never happened; the resolution of the Bangalore meet remained confined to papers. The unification committee did not meet ever again,' Sanyal lamented.

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With the Bangalore unification move going in vain, Sanyal initiated yet another negotiation process with five select Naxalite factions. The five groups were—the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Kaimur Range led by Ravi Shankar; the Central Organising Committee of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) led by Umadhar Singh; the Indian Communist Party led by M.H. Krishnappa; the Liberation Front led by Sabuj Sen; and lastly, a faction of the Unity Centre of Communist Revolutionaries of India (Marxist-Leninist) led by Subodh Mitra.

This time round, the endeavour bore fruit. The five Naxalite factions agreed in principle for a merger with the OCCR headed by

Kanu Sanyal. As a follow-up action, Sanyal convened a unification conference at Naxalbari in May 1985. The conference was witness to the successful merger of six Naxalite groups (including the OCCR), resulting in the birth of a new entity—the Communist Organisation of India (Marxist-Leninist), COI-ML. Sanyal was elected its general secretary.

'It was a remarkable achievement; the development received wide media coverage at the national level. As a result of the unification, I was feeling for the first time post-1967 that we were capable of doing something big. We are in a position to bring about a paradigm shift in the Indian Communist struggle,' Sanyal said.

COI-ML dropped the strategy of 'dedicated armed struggle' and instead put emphasis on building mass organisations. The party recognised parliamentary politics as a form of revolutionary tactics and subsequently, participated in the 1987 West Bengal Assembly poll.

In mid-1990, along with 11 other Communist factions, the COI-ML formed a Democratic Front for a united movement on issues of public interest. The first agitation that the Democratic Front undertook was against the hike in bus fares in West Bengal.

'The agitation shot to its peak on 31 August, when a crowd of not less than 30,000 people converged on the streets of central Calcutta to protest the fare hike. As the crowd was moving towards Esplanade, the police suddenly opened fire without any provocation. An activist of the Socialist Unity Concern of India (SUCI), Madhai Haldar, was killed on the spot,' recalled Sanyal.

The police firing stoked up popular discontent across the state of West Bengal; a shutdown convened by the 12-party front on 2 September, evoked a total response in every part of the state. Although the movement against bus fare hike and the subsequent developments were not directly linked to the COI-ML's political agenda, it did help the party to gain some attention from the public.

However, the euphoria did not last long. By 1991, the COI-ML got split into two camps—one led by Kanu Sanyal and the other headed by Karnataka based leader M.H. Krishnappa. The reasons for the split were more to do with operational aspects of the party; ideological issues were secondary.

Over the next one decade, several permutations and combinations of the Naxalite factions surfaced and fell apart. Infighting kept the

Naxalite groups preoccupied and as an obvious outcome, they lost focus from the very purpose of their existence.

Heading one faction of the COI-ML, Kanu Sanyal continued to strive for a visibly improbable target—the unity of the Indian Communist revolutionaries.

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In February 1999, while returning to Siliguri from Kolkata by a night train, Sanyal was attacked by a gang of dacoits. The miscreants had boarded the train in the guise of passengers.

'That was the 150th year of the publication of the Communist Manifesto. To commemorate the occasion, on 5 February, a conglomerate of various revolutionary Communist factions organised a panel discussion in Kolkata. The programme was held at the Students' Hall and I was invited as one of the speakers.'

'After the event, on 6 February, I boarded the New Jalpaiguri-bound Teesta Torsha Express from Sealdah to return to Sebdella Jote in Naxalbari. I was travelling in an unreserved general compartment; the coach was packed to the brim.'

'In the evening, as the train halted at Azimganj station in Bihar, a group of male passengers boarded the same compartment. They pushed their way into the crowed. On resumption of the journey, the train was about to chug into Nimtita station in Bengal area that the very group took to their actual avatar.'

'Wielding improvised firearms and lethal weapons in their hands, they asked all passengers in the compartment to dish out all the valuables. Terrified at the sudden turn of events, a compartment full of passengers began to follow the instruction of the dacoits without the slightest protest. But after staying idle for a few minutes, I could not stop myself and plunged over one of the dacoits.'

'*What are you all doing? Catch these miscreants*—I shouted at my co-passengers, while carrying on with a fierce scuffle with the armed miscreants. Responding to my call, a gentleman who was sleeping on the upper birth in my coupe, jumped over another dacoit.'

'In desperation, other members of the dacoit gang turned at us; one of them stabbed me on my left biceps with a dragger. Inflicting me, the same dacoit hit my co-fighter next. Yet, as result of the skirmish

and the subsequent chaos, the dacoits had to abort their operation midway. They pulled the emergency chain and got down from the train a little ahead of the Nimtita station,' Sanyal recalled.

With both Sanyal and his co-passenger being badly injured, others in the compartment demanded the railway authorities to arrange for their treatment. Finally about an hour later when the train reached Malda, the two were accorded some primary medical attention at the railway hospital there. Sanyal reached New Jalpaiguri station the next day morning by the same train.

Members of the COI-ML state committee in Kolkata had come to know about the attack on Kanu Sanyal from their sources in the media; they immediately alerted their counterparts in Siliguri. Thus when Sanyal reached the New Jalpaiguri station on the morning of 7 February, a few party cadres were already present there to receive him.

'Amazing, even after 15 hours of the incident, the police and the administration were yet to wake up from the perpetual slumber that they are known for. There was no effort to nab the miscreants or arrange for an elaborate treatment for Kanu *Da*. Finding no other way out, I called up Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the then Home Minister of Bengal. He was at the CPI-M's Alimuddin Street office in Kolkata for a party secretariat meeting. One might be surprised to know, the Home Minister of the state heard about the attack on Kanu *Da* for the first time from me,' recalled Mr Subrata Basu, the West Bengal state secretary of the CPI-ML.

Subsequent to the call to Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the administration swung into action. Government doctors rushed to the Sebdella Jote party office-cum-residence of Kanu Sanyal and he was soon shifted to the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri. There were also some visible signs of police activity as regards the arrest of the dacoits.

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Upon recovery from the injury, Sanyal once again focused on the organisational activities. He kept his agenda fixed on the unification of the Communist revolutionaries.

As a result of his persistent efforts, the COI-ML and the Central Organising Committee of the CPI (Marxist-Leninist)-Janashakti faction merged. On 17 January 2003, they assumed the name of the CPI-ML. Despite acquiring the same nomenclature, in its organisational resolution the new entity described itself as 'totally different from the CPI-ML of 1969'.

It also made it quite loud and clear that the new CPI-ML negates the political and ideological strategies of Charu Mazumdar. Rather, it is dedicated to carry forward the Indian Communist revolution in its distinct way, keeping in mind the specific traits of the Indian nation.

The party vowed to fight against the Right Revisionism as embodied by the CPI-M, and the Left Adventurism, as represented by the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC).

In January 2005, the CPI-ML Red Flag headed by K.N. Ramachandran of Kerala merged with the CPI-ML. Though Sanyal led the party as its central general secretary until his death; several differences on ideological and political issues continued to riddle the party from within.

The four basic issues occupying the centre-stage in CPI-ML's intra-party conflicts are: (1) strategy for the Indian Revolution, (2) views on the character of the Indian state, (3) identification of the primary contradiction in the Indian society and (4) the history of the party organisation.

In an all-India convention held in Andhra Pradesh in August 2007, there was an attempt to resolve these issues, but the initiative failed. The intra-party conflict continues to cast an adverse effect on CPI-ML's political vigour. Sanyal's aspiration for the unity of the Communist revolutionaries in India still remains a distant dream.

Today, there exist at least 12 active Naxalite factions, operating through the length and breadth of India. They are: (1) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) of Kanu Sanyal, (2) CPI (Maoist) led by Muppala Lakshmana Rao, (3) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation led by Dipankar Bhattacharya, (4) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Naxalbari led by Rauf, (5) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Janashakti led by Koora Rajanna, (6) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) of Mahadev Mukherjee, (7) Revolutionary

Communist Centre of India (Marxist-Leninist-Maoist), (8) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Red Flag led by Unnichekkan, (9) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) New Democracy led by Yatendra Kumar, (10) CPI (Marxist-Leninist) led by Somnath Chatterjee and Pradip Banerjee, (11) Provisional Central Committee, CPI (Marxist-Leninist) led by Santosh Rana and (12) the Communist Party Reorganisation Centre of India (Marxist-Leninist).

Of them, the CPI-ML (Liberation) happens to be the frontrunner, vis-à-vis utilising the parliamentary system as a form of revolutionary tactic. The party has already registered several electoral victories; it had a number of MLAs in the Bihar Assembly. The party also had a MP in the Lok Sabha from the erstwhile NC Hills district (renamed Dima Hasao in 2011) in Assam.

On the other hand, despite contesting almost every Lok Sabha, Assembly and the local body polls in West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh since 2005, the CPI-ML of Kanu Sanyal is yet to have an MLA or MP. In 2009, the party only had one elected gram panchayat member at the old bastion of Naxalbari.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In sharp contrast to the complete disarray state of the CPI-ML (Kanu Sanyal) and other similar Naxalite factions, the Communist Party of India (Maoist)—formed in 2004 by the merger of the erstwhile People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC)—is rising from strength to strength with the every passing day.

The CPI (Maoist) is sworn to an armed struggle against the Indian state and is often found practising the *individual annihilation line* of Charu Mazumdar. Yet, in tracing back the origin of their parent organisations in the 1967 Naxalbari uprising, the Maoists are often wrongly identified as *Naxalites* both by the media and in the administrative vocabulary.

The fact is that *Naxalism* and *Maoism* are two distinct traits of the Indian Communist Movement. While the followers of *Naxalism* do not necessarily indulge in armed conflicts and they do participate in elections, those practising *Maoism* believe that active arms struggle was the prime instrument to realise a Communist revolution in India. Unlike the Naxalites, Maoists abhor the parliamentary democracy.

As on today, the proscribed CPI (Maoist) holds sway in a large tract of the Indian territory, having their bases across the eight states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal and Maharashtra. The areas under Maoist dominance are collectively identified as the Red Corridor; the Communist insurgents are adding up new territories to the Red Corridor every day.

The *Maoist menace*, as the Constitutional authorities in India prefer to call it, is swelling with the participation from socio-economically backward communities such as the *Adivasi* tribal community. Growing dominance of the Maoists is troubling the Indian government so much that the Prime Minister identified the Maoists ultras as the biggest threat to the internal security of post-Independence India.

But despite all this, Sanyal was never impressed by the Maoist activities. The founder of the Naxalbari uprising instead accused the Maoists of practising Left Adventurism.

'Revolution and terrorism are not the same thing; while the former thrives on mass support and uses arms only as an additional tool, the latter is solely dependent on arms and ammunitions. Hence, taking to arms for a cause does not necessary mean one is treading the path of revolution; there is always the risk of straying into terrorism and that is what is happening to the Maoists. Despite the Maoists arguably championing the cause of the farmers, the real peasantry in India is still detached from them,' Sanyal would observe.

'To put it to a global context, we can take the example of Che Guevara. Che had put excessive emphasis on arms–ammunitions and the guerrilla warfare. The result: following the success of the Cuban Revolution, he went to Bolivia only to get killed in isolation, away from fellow comrades and the masses whose cause he used to champion. Che's tragic end also put a question mark on the logic and justification of Communists of one country meddling into the revolutionary pursuit of another.'

'Similarly, the problem with the Indian Maoists is that they rely more on arms and ammunitions than on the people. This is leading them towards isolation from the common masses,' he would add. Sanyal had drawn the inference after touring the *Maoist heartland* in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha in 2005–06.

'I have been to the villages where the Maoists apparently call the shots. There I found that the marginalised peasants were staying off the fields; they do not have the courage to put up a Red Flag on the paddy field and take to cultivation. They are scared of a backlash from the landlord gentry and the state forces.'

'If you cannot take this fear out of the peasantry and inculcate confidence in them, then what liberated zone what revolution you are talking about? This is happening because the Maoists are relying more on guns than on the human capital,' Sanyal observed.

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Kanu Sanyal was not opposed to armed struggle *per se*. What he and his comrades in the CPI-ML advocated for is to focus on building mass organisations and mass movements.

'Instead of being confined to arms struggle alone, all sorts of methods will have to be exploited. Conceding the realities of the Indian society, the revolutionary pursuit shall have to start with the lower form of struggle and then be taken to the upper stratum gradually. The foremost task is to build strong mass organisations and mass movements involving the workers and the peasants,' Sanyal would opine.

'This will eventually culminate into an armed struggle and put up a stiff challenge to the semi-colonial system of governance in India. After all, no revolution under the sun has ever been completed minus an armed uprising.'

It was this indelible confidence on the power of mass movements that made Kanu Sanyal rush to Singur and Nandigram in 2007 and express solidarity with the rural agitators there. He was one of the very few prominent personalities, who had extended an open support to the Singur and Nandigram agitations without a political equation in mind.

Sanyal was enthused by the possibilities thrown up by the two agitations, particularly by the one at Nandigram, so much so that in an interview with *The Statesman* published on 31 March 2007, he had famously commented that *Nandigram can excel Naxalbari*.[1]

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[1] Bappaditya Paul, 'Nandigram can excel Naxalbari', *The Statesman*, Kolkata edition, 31 March 2007.

'The movement that has generated out of Singur and Nandigram, if explored properly, can bring about a sea change in West Bengal. As far as the form is concerned, I find a great deal of similarity between the Nandigram and the Naxalbari Movement. The on-going fight in Nandigram, in particular, has the potential to excel the Naxalbari Movement. The only thing needed is a strong, selfless, political leadership to sustain it,' he had said in the interview.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the Trinamul Congress chief Mamata Banerjee's highly publicised role in the Singur and Nandigram agitations, Sanyal held her responsible for diluting the enormous prospects that the agitations had thrown up.

In *The Statesman* interview, Sanyal alleged: 'Mamata Banerjee has ruined the movement in Singur. By embarking on a hunger strike, she spoilt the ignition of the Singur farmers. I am sure, the farmers of Singur will never get back their land and Miss Banerjee will remain solely responsible for this.'

'Just take a look at the happenings in Singur: as long as the farmers were battling it out themselves, the state government could not erect a fence on the acquired land. But soon after Miss Banerjee hijacked the movement and started her fast, the focus shifted to Esplanade and the fencing work went on in Singur unabated.'

Sanyal had also accused Mamata Banerjee of diverting the mass movement at Nandigram into a political harvest show. It was the Nandigram agitation, round which, Sanyal once again tried to push his agenda for the unity of the Communist revolutionaries in India.

But contrary to his endeavour, two of his frontline comrades from southern Bengal—Purnendu Bose and Dola Sen sided with the Trinamul Congress. The development prompted the CPI-ML to expel them from the party.

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Unlike Nandigram, in the case of the Lalgarh agitation of 2009, Kanu Sanyal restrained his euphemism and opined that Lalgarh was not a Communist Movement. He did not find any similarity between the Lalgarh agitation and the landmark Naxalbari Movement of the 1960s.

Below are the excerpts of Sanyal's interview on Lalgarh that was published in *The Statesman*.[2]

Q: Do you support the Lalgarh agitation spearheaded by the People's Committee?
—No, we don't. Because the Lalgarh agitation is strictly an ethnic insurrection by the *Adivasi* community and it is not inclusive of the other communities living there. It is easy to name an organisation as "People's Committee" but that does not necessarily mean it represents all the people cutting across the various communities.

Q: Given that the Maoists are actively participating in the Lalgarh agitation, do you consider this a Communist struggle?
—I just told you that Lalgarh agitation is confined within the *Adivasi* community alone. How can an ethic uprising be termed a Communist struggle? Lalgarh is certainly not a Communist uprising. The Maoists are only exploiting the situation by using the *Adivasi*s as stooges to carry forward their agenda of individual terrorism.

Q: How do you weigh the Centre and the state's role on the Lalgarh turmoil?
—No one is willing to take charge of the situation. Rather both the state and the Centre are trying to pass the buck on to each other. The CPI-M-led state government allowed the Lalgarh crisis to escalate by not addressing the genuine grievances of the *Adivasi*s in time. And now the Congress and the Trinamul are on the lookout to exploit the situation so to dislodge the Left Front from power, either immediately or in the 2011 Assembly election in the state.

Q: Would you support a ban on the CPI (Maoist) in West Bengal?
—State suppression can never be the answer for tackling any sort of terrorism. You ban one outfit today and another would crop up tomorrow. Thus the need is to alienate them by going close to the poor people and address their grievances fast.

As evident from the interview, Sanyal recognised that the *Adivasi*s of Lalgarh were having some genuine grievances, which were not

[2] Bappaditya Paul, 'Lalgarh is not a Communist Movement', *The Statesman*, Kolkata edition, 20 June 2009.

addressed by the government of the day. At the same time, he identified the agitation as yet another ploy of the Left Adventurists to further the strategy of *individual terrorism*.

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As regards the farmland versus industrialisation debate in West Bengal, Kanu Sanyal was of the opinion that the ruling CPI-M was more eager to serve the needs of the *exploitative and imperialist industrialists*. The CPI-M has got detached from the peasantry—the interests and cause of whom the party claims to have championed for the past four decades.

'Who does not want industrialisation and employment? But the question is what industry you are talking about and for whose benefit? Instead of setting up need-based industries, the Left Front government in West Bengal is gunning down the farmers and forcibly acquiring their multi-crop farmland for a car factory. Is this what you call industrialisation for the benefit of the common masses?' Sanyal would question.

'If the government is so desperate about industrialisation and wants to create employment, then why it is not putting a honest effort to reopen the closed tea gardens in the Dooars of northern Bengal, which can sustain scores of unskilled *Adivasi* workers? Why is not there any attempt to reopen the near 39,000 industrial units that are locked out across the state? The truth is, the government is not at all serious about industrialisation or agriculture. Rather it is more interested on show offs,' he observed.

Successful land reform is one area that the CPI-M in Bengal often credits itself for. The claim also finds some resonance amongst the economists and the intelligentsia. Despite this, Sanyal used to allege that the *mainstream* Communist parties in India—namely the CPI and the CPI-M never had the political will for a radical land reforms. They compromised on the very agenda, which they pat themselves for.

'It was while being lodged at the Visakhapatnam Jail in the 1970s that I looked back at the affairs of the Communist Party in India right from the time of its inception. I realised that the mainstream Communist parties never had the political will for a radical land reforms in the country. Upon emerging out of a split in the CPI in 1964, the

CPI-M too chose to walk the middle path. CPI-M compromised on the rights of the farmers to secure the interests of the landlord class.'

'This compromising tendency was evident during the 1953 West Bengal state *Krishak Sabha* conference at Malda, when the Communist stalwart Bankim Mukherjee's proposal for drafting a fresh Bill for radical land reforms was rejected unceremoniously. Also during the 1967 Naxalbari Movement, senior most CPI-M leader, Pramod Dasgupta and the party's Provincial Committee talked of sitting with the Darjeeling district *Krishak Sabha* to learn our views about land reforms. But it never happened,' Sanyal recalled.

'What was the demand around which the Naxalbari Movement revolved? It was the simple call that every inch of land out of the ceiling limit must be handed over to the peasantry; the farmers would then settle their own claims on such plots. Meaning, an individual landlord can retain the ownership of a maximum of 24.8-acres land as permitted by the law and the rest must go to the tillers and the sharecroppers. Ironically, the CPI-M leadership did not back the idea; there was always a tendency to opt for a middle path,' Sanyal would point out.

This prompted Sanyal to always stress on the need for a *true and united* Communist revolutionary party devoid of the traits of both Right Revisionism and Left Adventurism.

With him being vocal and outright in his condemnation of the Left Adventurism as embodied by the CPI (Maoist), one might get tempted to confuse his politics for the CPI-M's. Especially because in 2010 Sanyal's party, the CPI-ML, ruled the Hatighisa gram panchayat in Naxalbari jointly with the CPI-M. But there exists a gulf of difference between the policies of the CPI-M and the CPI-ML.

The CPI-M has accepted the parliamentary institutions as the prime tool to bring about a change in the Indian society; the party does not talk of an armed revolution.

The CPI-ML on the other hand talks of mass organisations and mass movements but only to further the cause of an armed revolution. The party believes that a combination of mass movements and armed struggle can alone bring about a radical change in the system of governance in India. Like several other Naxalite factions, for the CPI-ML too, participation in the parliamentary system is only a *tactical move*.

'But how should we carry forward the cause of revolution? Certainly not the Chinese way, nor the Russian, or the Cuban way; the Indian Revolution must chart its own course. The focus has to be on uniting and sensitising the people through mass organisations and mass movements. The pursuit has to begin with the lower form of struggle and then gradually rise to the higher level,' Sanyal had opined.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

There are not many political leaders be it in India or abroad, whose private and public life is synonymous. Kanu Sanyal was one such extraordinary person, who sacrificed his private life for a public cause that he believed in—that is the dream of a Communist revolution in India.

It is difficult to trace back the footprints of his private life from the voluminous chapters of his political career that spans a little over 60 years. In all practical sense, Sanyal's private and public life were assimilated into each other in a manner that it is not possible to talk of one without mentioning the other.

Sanyal entered politics in 1948 at the age of 19 when he was right at the bloom of youth. As a result, he neither had the inclination nor the time to focus on relationships, especially with the opposite gender, which is quite natural for an individual of this age. When his fellow classmates were busy in following the natural tendency and were befriending with girls of their age, Sanyal was teaming up with student-activist Rakhal Choudhury of Babupara in Siliguri to oppose the West Bengal government's ban on the Communist Party of India (CPI).

'Those were the days of activity and excitement. We used to paste anti-government posters condemning the ban on the CPI and there would always be some secret meeting to chalk out new strategies to carry forward the pro-CPI campaign. Spending idle time with female friends in leisure would not even come to my mind because I neither had a girlfriend nor any spare time.'

'In 1949, we had organised an anti-government rally coinciding the Siliguri visit of the then Chief Minister Bidhan Chandra Roy. The protest march started from Babupara; fellow comrade Rakhal Choudhury's younger sister had taken the lead in drawing the women participants into the rally. She was almost of my age and apart from my mother, was perhaps the only woman whom I had given a minute's glance until then,' Sanyal would recall.

But that is all. He neither felt the urge nor had the time to talk to the young lady; the question of a friendship between them was a far cry. Not very long after that, in 1950 Sanyal went to jail for the first time. On being released after a few months, he was inducted into the Communist Party. Then in 1951 came the call for becoming a CPI whole-timer; the proposal pitched Sanyal against the responsibilities towards his family.

'It was a tough call. My father had already retired from the government job and post-marriage, one of my elder brothers had separated from the family and another elder brother was unemployed. Of the two younger brothers—while one used to work as a proofreader in a local printing press for a meager salary, the other was still into studies along with my younger sister.'

'Dad's pension was the only livelihood for our family and hence, being an adult male member, I thought, it was my duty to help the family to sustain. After considering all pros and cons, I had decided against becoming a CPI whole-timer. I had realised that serving the party and the family with equal dedication was not feasible. But later upon hearing Charu Mazumdar during a group meeting, I underwent an unexpected change of mind and overlooking the responsibilities towards my parents, I finally became a party whole-timer.'

'It was then that I pledged not to get married. My reasoning was that since I would not be able to fulfil the duties towards my parents, I do not have the moral right to take the responsibility of someone else,' Sanyal explained.

After this came a tumultuous and harsh political journey that charted its course for over 60 years through an unbeaten path.

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Call it the affinity of certain sections for rumourmongering or a deliberate attempt to malign Kanu Sanyal; on more than one occasion, he was rumoured to have married or having love affairs with *Adivasi* female comrades. The vilification campaign was so intense that on one occasion, even Sanyal's mother Nirmala *Devi* was made to believe that he had married not one, but two *Adivasi* women and was having four to five children. The byline for this sensational piece of news rested with a near relative of their family.

'That was two to three years before of the outbreak of the Naxalbari uprising. I had started living in Naxalbari area from 1951 and ever since I would occasionally visit my parents in Siliguri to stay with them for a day or two. During one such visit, while serving me dinner *Maa* sought to ask me a question on the condition that I would tell the truth.'

'Surprised at her approach, I assured *Maa* that ever since growing up, I had never lied to her. Being reassured, she hesitantly sought to know if I had married some *Adivasi* woman and was having children from her. On hearing this, I burst into laughter and *Maa* was intelligent enough to get the answer. Actually, a maternal uncle of mine was the one, who had undertaken the plight of passing on this cock-and-bull story to my mother,' recalled Sanyal.

There was another occasion, in 1964, when his name was wrongfully attached to an *Adivasi* woman. Sanyal was then lodged at the Dum Dum Central Jail in Calcutta.

'Simon Minz, an *Adivasi* christian, was the president of the *Krishak Sabha* unit at Chouphukhuria near Bagdogra. Later, his wife Sophia also became an active comrade; she used to organise women activists across the tea estates of Terai.'

'When I was lodged in the Dum Dum Jail in 1964, Simon Minz died of cirrhosis. Getting to know of his untimely demise, I wrote to Sophia offering my condolences; I had written the letter in Hindi on a postcard. To my utter disgust, the letter became the source of a non-sensical rumour that I was having an affair with Sophia. The rumour went on to suggest that I would marry Sophia on coming out

of jail. That was despite Sophia being much elder to me and she used to affectionately treat me like her younger brother. There were many occasions when she had gifted us her domesticated goat or poultry for consumption in party conferences,' Sanyal pointed out.

'Unfortunately, during the Naxalbari Movement in 1967, while being in the underground, Sophia was inflicted with pneumonia and died for lack want of treatment.'

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The height of all defamation attempts targeting Sanyal's personal and political integrity came in 1983. The Kerala-based English national weekly newsmagazine *The Week* published an article in its issue dated 12–18 June. The article was titled *Kanu Sanyal—Rich Naxalite*.

The article was penned by the magazine's New Delhi–based correspondent Anil Saari. In that write-up, it was reported that Sanyal was married and had children and that he was the owner of a vast tract of land, bank balance and several other movable assets. A reporting of this nature appearing in a national newsmagazine is enough to ruin an individual's public image earned through years of selfless political struggle.

Sanyal and his fellow comrades took exception of the malicious and incorrect news article. Subsequently, Sanyal filed a lawsuit against the magazine's then chief editor K.M. Mathew, publisher Philip Mathew and the correspondent Anil Saari. The suit was filed in the court of the Subdivisional Judicial Magistrate (SDJM) in Siliguri; Sanyal sought them to produce necessary evidence in support of the claims made in the article. This made the accused persons to come all the way from Cochin in Kerala to the small subdivisional town of Siliguri and appear before the SDJM court there.

'On the sidelines of attending the court, the concerned journalist, accompanied by a managerial person from the magazine, came to meet me at the Sebdella Jote party-office-cum-commune. Following a brief discussion, they tried to hush up the case by offering me a private apology. When I refused to budge, they tried luring me promising adequate monetary compensation and urged me to withdraw the litigation.'

'By then the magazine's authorities were confirmed that there was not an iota of truth in the story that they had published. But they were

neither inclined to offer a public apology nor were willing to stand defeated in the court as that would severely dent the image of their magazine. Hence, they were pestering me to settle the matter privately.'

'I was extremely angered at the audacity of their offer for compensation, but keeping my cool I clarified that nothing short of a public and published apology in their magazine would make me take back the litigation,' Sanyal continued.

With no other way out, *The Week* relented after over eight months. The magazine published a special corrective article *Sanyal bid for unity* in its issue dated 11–17 March 1984. The single-page article by a Calcutta based correspondent, Tapash Ganguly, precisely narrated the political and private life of Kanu Sanyal. It also threw light on his relentless endeavours for the unity of the Communist revolutionaries in India.

The Week further sufficed the remedial course by publishing an apology from its editor and the concerned correspondent in the magazine's issue dated 15–21 April the same year. The apology was prominently accommodated in BEHIND THE SCENES section of the magazine and read as follows:

> I wrote an article in the magazine *The Week*, dated June 12–18, 1983, containing some serious allegations against Mr Kanu Sanyal, the eminent Naxalite leader, on the basis of incorrect information, which I have come to know afterwards is totally false and baseless.
>
> I am repentant for my said act and I sincerely express my regret for the same. I also beg to make an unconditional apology to Sri Kanu Sanyal and I believe I shall be excused by Sri Sanyal this time.—Anil Saari, New Delhi.

Just below that was an apology penned by the editor of the magazine V.K.B. Nair. It read as follows:

> The issue of *The Week* dated June 12–18, 1983, contained a report captioned Kanu Sanyal—Rich Naxalite. We had published that report by our correspondent in good faith, but it now appears that the allegations in it were false and baseless.
>
> We sincerely regret its publication and apologise for the offence unwittingly caused to Mr Kanu Sanyal. We do not question Mr Sanyal's

personal integrity or his dedication to his political beliefs. The correspondent concerned has offered his resignation, which has been accepted in the circumstances.—Editor

The personal and administrative division manager of *The Week*, Mr Rajan Mathew, later sent an official letter to Sanyal on 12 April 1984. Enclosed with it was a copy of the said issue of *The Week*, in which the apology had been published. Consequent to this, Sanyal withdrew the case against the newsmagazine on 27 April 1984.

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Kanu Sanyal had dedicated his entire life for the cause of Communism. He not only wilfully deprived himself of the usual social and family life but also always attached priority to political activities over family obligations.

Prior to plunging into full-time politics, Sanyal, however, was an extremely sincere family person with utmost respect for family values and ethos. He always ensured that he and his siblings adhered to the basic family decorum; in the event of any difference with parents, they must not argue beyond the level of decency. And whenever there was a violation of this principle, Sanyal did not keep mum.

'It was during 1949–50. My *Borda* (elder brother) Amiya used to run a small-time garment shop in Siliguri. He was married and had children and used to stay put together with our parent family in the rented house at Kalahati area in the town. *Borda* was inflicted with the habit of taking alcohol.'

'One evening, post dinner, I was discussing politics with my father that *Borda* returned home in a complete inebriated condition. He was not in his senses and began hurling abuses at *Baba* for not enabling him a better livelihood. I tried to stop him but *Borda* went ahead and called *Baba* whatever he could; with his continuing abuse-spree, the neighbours began peeping into the scene.'

'After a while, I lost my cool and shouted back at *Borda* in a more amplified voice than his. Teeming with anger, I asked him to leave the house at once with his wife and children. *Borda* tried to put up a protest, but none in the family came out in his support and he had to leave the house with his wife and children in the midst of the night.

That night they found shelter in the house of our paternal aunt located in another part of Siliguri. They stayed there for about a month till *Baba* arranged him an alternative accommodation in a relief colony meant for the East Pakistan refugees,' Sanyal said.

After he became a CPI whole-timer in 1951, the relationship between Sanyal and his father turned completely cold. His father was extremely angry and frustrated at his decision.

'Since the day I got into full-time politics, *Baba* cut off a direct conversation with me; the only exception was whenever I visited our house in Siliguri, he would wait until I had finished my meal and then pillory me for getting into politics by overlooking a secure and financially rewarding professional life. But in later years that too had stopped. *Baba* also never visited me in jail—be it in Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri or elsewhere,' recalled Sanyal.

In contrast, Sanyal's attachment with his mother Nirmala was very intimate; they were like two close mates. Nirmala always kept worrying about Sanyal and persistently tried to get him back to what she considered a *regular life*. It was quite often than not that she would pester him to get married and settle down.

But when Sanyal turned down her persistent pleas, Nirmala decided to go ahead with the marriage of his younger brother Prabir. It was in May 1967, just a few days before the outbreak of the Naxalbari Movement.

'By then we had already began capturing farmland above the ceiling limit and started confiscating the season's harvest. Also we were forcing out the landlords from Naxalbari area. Consequent to this, the police secured warrants against several active *Krishak Sabha* comrades, including me. Finding the situation going out of control, *Krishak Sabha* state committee leader and then West Bengal land revenue minister, Harekrishna Konar came down to Siliguri. Konar invited Sourin Bose and me for a truce meeting at the Sukna forest bungalow.'

'We attended the meeting on the assurance that the police would not arrest us during the negotiation process. Although the meeting was unsuccessful, utilising the safe passage, I paid a visit to my family in Siliguri. During the few hours stay, *Maa* informed about Prabir's marriage and began pestering me for attending the ceremony. It was only after much persuasion that I could make her understand that

the safe passage was valid for only a day. I told her that if I came to Siliguri later, the police would put me behind the bars.'

'A few days from that, Prabir got married in my absence; but that was not the only occasion when I had to stay away from family events. Due to political compulsions, I used to fail almost every family obligations, be it a happy or a sad one,' Sanyal pointed out.

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Despite this, mother Nirmala never fell short of affection for Sanyal. In fact unlike his father, she used to keep track of her son's political activities on a regular basis and also visited him several times whenever he was lodged in the jails at Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.

'She used to come to meet me in jail accompanied by my younger brother Prabir or some other male member in our relation. During every such visit, for the first few minutes she would silently wail over my state of affairs and only after that she would enquire about my health and other related issues.'

'I remember, while lodged in the Darjeeling Jail, I had once written to *Maa* asking her to bring along some raw tobacco during her next visit. Chewing tobacco is the only addiction that I had picked up from my initial days in the jails and could not quit the habit ever again. When *Maa* came to see me at the jail next time, she angrily questioned my audacity for asking her to bring tobacco.'

'*How could you dare ask your mother to bring something that has got to do with addiction? I have not brought any tobacco*, she had told angrily. In response, I told her that since I was already addicted to chewing tobacco there was hardly any point why I should have hid the fact from her. After hearing this, she handed over me a small packet of raw tobacco that she had brought along,' said Sanyal.

Sanyal always cherished the sacrifices made by his mother and admired her capacity to curtail on her personal desires to keep their family afloat. Nirmala's hard work and thrift was the key to the sustenance of the low-income Sanyal family.

'My mother originally belonged from Jashore in undivided Bengal. She was very fond of the *Boal* fish. But after marriage, she never had the opportunity to savour the fish as none in our family liked *Boal*; the fish was expensive too. After I got the job at Kalimpong

subdivisional office in 1948, one day *Maa* hesitantly asked me if I could bring a *Boal* fish; the condition was that I would also eat the fish along with her. *It's been ages since I have savoured Boal. I miss the taste so much*—she told me. I felt very blessed in being able to fulfil her wish,' Sanyal recalled.

To talk of food, Sanyal had an inclination for spicy cuisines: be it vegetarian or non-vegetarian. Among all fishes, he was particularly fond of *Hilsa, Katla* and the *Bata* varieties; chicken was his another favourite. But above all was his liking for *Payesh*—a dessert prepared by boiling rice in milk along with sugar.

'An aunt of my mother used to prepare some real tantalising dishes of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian genres. I still remember the taste of her preparations even after so many years,' Sanyal would tell.

But in the later days of his life, it was only in recollection that he could think of good food. At the Sebdella Jote party office where Sanyal lived till his last, even managing a plain and simple meal in time was a big deal. Sometimes a lady CPI-ML activist living in the neighbourhood used to supply him meals at the one-room office-cum-residence; on other occasions, there was a domestic help who used to cook him whatever she could.

'Even three to four years ago, I used to cook for myself and mind you, I am not a bad cook at all. I learnt cooking during my early days in politics. In fact till 2004–05, I also used to cook *Payesh* and share it with the *Adivasi* children residing in my neighbourhood. But nowadays, I cannot afford it anymore, both physically and financially. I can hardly see properly,' Sanyal had told.

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Ever since plunging into the Communist politics in 1950, Sanyal lived an impoverished life all through his life. He shared the same plight that the *Adivasi* tea workers in Terai encountered in their daily struggle for existence. The only precious wealth, Sanyal never gave up and clutched close onto his heart all his life was his unmatched honesty and integrity.

After his release from jail in 1979, Sanyal had found accommodation at Sebdella Jote village near Naxalbari in the hutment of fellow comrade Keshav Sarkar. Keshav Sarkar had only one room, where he

lived with his wife and children. Hence, Kanu was finding it uncomfortable to put up in their house.

In mid-1980, he collected 10,000 rupees as help from his Calcutta-based elder cousin to buy a plot of land; another 10,000 came from his party's Andhra Pradesh state committee. With the 20,000 rupees, Sanyal purchased a barren plot lying next to the hutment of Keshav Sarkar and built a mud dwelling there. Apart from facilitating him accommodation, the dwelling also doubled up as his party's Darjeeling district committee office and commune.

'I had purchased the plot in the name of our Darjeeling district secretary, comrade Jogen Biswakarma. Firstly because, being a tribal-land, the plot could not have been registered in the name of any general category people including me. Secondly, I wanted this to be a permanent address for our party,' he pointed out.

In 1999, the hay-roofed mud dwelling was damaged in a wild elephant raid; luckily, Sanyal was out of Sebdella Jote then. On his return, he found the hutment in a devastated state and to rebuild the shelter, he once again collected 7,000 rupees as assistance from his brother. The one-room mud house was subsequently rebuilt with tin roofing; alongside, another small hutment was constructed on the right side of the main mud house. This was to provide for the accommodation of CPI-ML workers coming to Sebdella Jote from outside.

In June 2002, Sanyal's comrades facilitated an electricity connection to the main mud house, which was followed by a wireless local loop (WLL)-based phone connection on 23 December the same year. The one-room hutment in which Sanyal lived a Spartan life till his last was equipped with a ceiling fan and an electric bulb.

In one corner of the 8 × 10 feet room stood an old wooden almirah stuffed with the party's files and other documents. Half-bust framed photographs of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engles, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and several other local comrades, covered the entire bamboo-wall inside the room.

Whatever meagre apparels Sanyal had, those used to suspend from a rope slung across the breadth of the hutment. Instead of using any furniture, Sanyal used to sleep on the mud floor on a thin cotton mattress. Thinking that Sanyal was probably facing difficulty in sleeping on the floor, a relative had gifted him a foldable cot in

2004, but he never used the cot. It used to lay idle in one corner of the mud house.

'Since late 1950, I have rarely used a bed to sleep. That was because the *Adivasis* in whose hutments I used to spend the nights were bereft of any such amenities. Eventually, I developed the habit of sleeping on the floor and any deviation from this now leaves me sleepless,' Sanyal explained.

This is what Kanu Sanyal was, a man who could have easily found accommodation in the corridors of power if he had only compromised on his ideological stand. But he chose otherwise. Sanyal had turned down repeated requests from the CPI-M top rank to return to the fold of the *mainstream* Communist Party. Because he considered that the CPI-M was not practising Communism any more.

'It was in late 1979, I had gone to the Writers' Buildings in Kolkata to meet Jyoti Basu. He was the Chief Minister then and I approached him to seek clemency for six of our young party comrades; they were serving life term for the murder of Forward Bloc leader Hemanta Bose. These six youths—the oldest one of them being barely 30-year old and the rest aged around 22 years—were the only CPI-ML cadres still languishing behind the bars.'

'I urged Jyoti *Babu* for their release. I told him that when all other Naxalite prisoners had been set free, those youths too deserve clemency for they still have a life to live. On this, Jyoti *Babu* cited the stiff opposition from the Forward Bloc but assured me to look into the matter. On the sidelines of these discussions, Jyoti *Babu* suddenly requested me to come back to the CPI-M again.'

'*You see, even after Naxalbari, you were never formally expelled from the party. The party needs comrades like you. Come back.* Jyoti *Babu* told me. At first, I was a little astonished at his offer, but then replied right on his face. I told him: *You see Jyoti Babu, I have burnt my bridges with the CPI-M way back in 1967. Hence I do not have the slightest inclination to return to the CPI-M or the CPI ever again, even if that means I am to give up politics for good.* Saying this, I instantly pulled out of Jyoti Basu's chamber,' Sanyal recalled.

Right since 1955, Sanyal had stopped taking the honorarium granted to whole-timers in the Communist Party. He used to survive on direct assistance from the tea workers and peasants with whom

he worked—he shared their food and sought financial aid from them whenever required.

Post-1979, that is after his release from jail, Sanyal found sustenance on the financial contributions made by the Terai tea workers to his party's trade union fund. He continued with this practice until 2004, when his failing health limited his political activity; without bothering the party he now looked forward for financial aid from his brother.

'Kanu *Da*'s acceptance was such that many individuals were more than willing to pay lakhs of rupees at his single call but he never exploited such opportunity. There were several occasions when our relatives visited Kanu *Da* at Sebdella Jote and offered him substantial amount of financial assistance. On every such occasion, he outrightly turned down the offerings.'

'Instead he used to wait for the monthly 400 rupees assistance, which I used to extend him. This 400 rupees and another few hundreds from his tea trade union fund were Kanu *Da*'s only source of livelihood in the last few years of his life,' said Sanyal's younger brother Prabir, with whom he shared a close bonding.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Since the beginning of 2004, Sanyal's health started to deteriorate drastically; he was encountering intolerable pain on account of piles. The pain was so acute that it almost engulfed him. To get some relief from the perpetual sting, he would lie in the sun from morning to noon.

But when the soreness did not show any sign of permanent relent, Sanyal called on Dr Shyama Prashad Banerjee in Siliguri for a check-up.

Dr Banerjee is the physician on whom Sanyal used to rely completely; the surgeon too had treated him on several occasions without craving for money.

Visiting Dr Banerjee, Sanyal requested him to perform a surgery on the troubled body part and grant him a permanent relief from the acute soreness. But the seasoned physician turned down the suggestion; instead, he prescribed Sanyal some oral medication.

'Interestingly, within a month the trouble of piles deserted me completely. But perhaps because of the high dose of medication, my physical condition turned frail ever since; nowadays, there is always a feeling of weakness,' Sanyal would tell.

The general feeling of weakness was not the only malady that had inflicted Sanyal; he had undergone surgery on both his eyes to clear impediments of the eyesight. His left eye was operated upon at the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri in 1998. Three years later, in 2001, he underwent another surgery on his right eye. The second surgery was performed at a Calcutta hospital. But none of these surgeries could clear his vision. On the contrary, in 2002, Sanyal's left eye got completely bereaved of sight; the capabilities of his right eye also got reduced by almost 50 per cent.

'That was a major jolt for me. I, along with party comrades, explored all possible treatments available to repair my eyesight. On the sidelines of our party conferences, comrades had even taken me to the famous Eye Corporate Hospital in Hyderabad and the Shankar Netralaya in Chennai, but to no avail. After performing several tests, the eye specialists there told that my left eye was inflicted with a disease called the *perforation of the retina*; till then there was no specific remedy known for the malady.'

'Interestingly, this was exactly what a Siliguri-based eye-specialist had told me without even performing any tests. Anyway, now I am totally dependent on the partial vision of my right eye and this has limited my activities to a great extent. In order to read newspapers or books, I need to go into bright sunlight. That too up to a maximum of 11 in the morning; after that, I cannot bear the strain on my eyes,' Sanyal said.

Spondylitis was already troubling Sanyal even before the symptoms of general weakness and impediments of the eyesight had struck him; he was inflicted with spondylitis in his waist since 2004. But overlooking all such health issues, he took part extensively in the 2006 West Bengal Assembly poll campaign for his party, the CPI-ML.

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Notwithstanding the ever-deteriorating health conditions, Sanyal used to regularly visit the tea plantations in the Dooars of Jalpaiguri. The All West Bengal Tea Garden Labour Union (AWBTGLU)—the tea trade union of the CPI-ML had its branches in many of the tea gardens in the Dooars. The long locked-out Kathalguri tea garden is one of those plantations that Sanyal used to frequent.

On the sidelines of such visits, he would often halt for a day or two at Birpara, in the house of his younger sister Usha Choudhury. That was the only recess that he used to avail to get replenished for his never-ending political strife. In 2007, in view of Sanyal's fast deteriorating health conditions, his sister urged him to relocate to her place permanently. The offer pitched him against a dilemma: whether to choose personal convenience or political obligations.

'Due to of my failing health, these days I am not that much politically active. Yet if I move to Birpara permanently, there would be none to handle the affairs at Sebdella Jote. Scores of tea workers and poor peasants come to our office every day to seek redress for their daily hassles; who would answer them? Birpara is too far from Naxalbari; the party comrades would also not be able to visit me regularly for advice.'

'Besides all these factors, Usha may be younger to me but she too is aged and often keeps unwell. With both her sons staying away due to their professional obligations, she and her husband live alone at Birpara. My relocating to their place permanently would be nothing but imposing further hardships on them,' Sanyal had reasoned.

Eventually, Sanyal turned down his sister's offer but continued with the practice of visiting her house at Birpara quite often than not; at least once in a month.

During one such visit on 26 June 2008, Sanyal suffered a cerebral attack. After administering him some initial treatment at Birpara, his party workers and relatives brought Sanyal to the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri the next day.

The cerebral attack paralysed the entire right side of his body and also impaired his speech to a great extent. People close to him sensed danger in this and almost lost hope.

'That was a massive attack. The intensity was such that we all feared, it might turn fatal,' recalled Pradeep Debnath, who had been Sanyal's closest aide and comrade since 2002.

But after all, it was Kanu Sanyal! After being under treatment for a fortnight, he came out of the danger and recuperated to a remarkable extent. The cerebral attack, however, left his speech partially impaired and due to the paralytic condition of the right side of his body, Sanyal was unable to walk without support. Advising him some

physiotherapy measures, doctors hoped that Sanyal would get fully recovered in due course.

On being discharged from the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital, Sanyal's nephew, Arindam, did not allow him to return to Sebdella Jote immediately. He arranged for Sanyal's stay in a rented apartment near Air View More in Siliguri; that was to facilitate him an easy access to post-hospitalisation treatment.

The apartment was equipped with all modern facilities and Sanyal's comrades Pradeep Debnath, Deepu Halder and Jogen Biswakarma used to stay put with him on a rotation basis. But after lodging there for about two months, Sanyal got fed up and returned to the party office-cum-commune at Sebdella Jote.

'Everything was fine with that apartment but I was feeling detached from my comrades,' he was to explain later.

By the time Sanyal returned to Sebdella Jote, his health conditions had improved a little. He could now walk slowly without any support but his speech was still impaired. As advised by doctors, Sanyal began to embark on a 1.5-km stroll from Sebdella Jote to Hatighisha Bazar every morning and in the afternoon. Aide Pradeeep Debnath or neighbour-comrade, Shanti Munda, used to accompany him during the stroll. With the routine exercise and simultaneous medication, Sanyal's health was improving by the day.

But the cerebral stroke had probably left a permanent scar on his psyche; taking note of his physical condition, Sanyal would now often conclude that 'A man is bound by his physique.'

'I have become so frail, I can hardly move independently. There is so much left to be done; I am still beaming with ideas to carry forward the (Communist) struggle but what is the use of ideas when I cannot actively implement them? That is why I say, man is bound by his physique,' Sanyal had said adding a perspective to his conclusion.

Citing inability to actively participate in party activities, Sanyal had on three occasions offered to resign as the CPI-ML general secretary. He extended the resignation offers between 2005 and 2009, but his comrades in the CPI-ML central committee turned down the move saying that they needed his guidance. It would be enough even if Sanyal could only advise the party, they had told.

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Ill health and a reduced political activity had begun to push Kanu Sanyal into depression. He also began to suffer from loneliness and was desperately in want of essential care that an individual of his age must get.

Before the cerebral attack in June 2008, Sanyal used to have his lunch at a female party comrade's house in the neighbourhood. The house was located about 100 m away from his party office-cum-residence; dinner used to be home-delivered by the same party activist. After the cerebral attack, the arrangement became untenable.

His comrades in the CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee hired a domestic help—an *Adivasi* woman from the neighbourhood to cook Sanyal his meals. She was also to help him in other routine chores. But that too was not working; the *Adivasi* help would often vanish without any intimation and resurface at her whims. Ill health, loneliness and the daily hassles put together made Sanyal to offer a *suo moto* advice to the Communist activists on marriage.

'There are some senior comrades who always opine against marriage, but I say that it is important that a Communist marry at his/her appropriate age; there is no harm in it. I have learnt by experience that individuals do feel lonely; besides at this old age, there is none to look after me. After all, at this age you need certain amount of care.'

'It is improper to think that if a Communist marries, she or he will lose dedication to the cause of Communism, to the cause of Revolution. It all depends on the individual. Mao Tse-tung had married thrice but did that stop him from instating Communism in China? Thus, my view is that one must marry to become a complete person; this will further perk up the sense of responsibility towards family and the society at large,' Sanyal would insist.

Sensing Sanyal's loneliness and the need for care, younger brother Prabir urged him to move to his residence at Babupara in Siliguri. That was in 2009. Significantly, this time round, Sanyal readily gave his assent. To facilitate a comfortable stay for him, his brother earmarked a portion of his apartment for Sanyal. Some necessary infrastructural changes were also made keeping in mind Sanyal's age and ill health.

Early in October 2009, Sanyal shifted to his brother's residence at Babupara, leaving behind an instruction for party comrades that they could visit him whenever required.

However, this arrangement too was short-lived. Barely after spending a week, Sanyal started to feel 'suffocated' in the closed environment. On top of it, he developed a sense of remorse for imposing unnecessary trouble on his brother's family. Consequently, he relocated again to his old shelter—the CPI-ML party office at Sebdella Jote.

'*Bouma* (brother's wife) was very caring and attentive towards me; she left no stone unturned to facilitate me a comfortable stay. But her family too is dogged by several problems, vis-à-vis affairs related to her daughter, etc.; besides, I was feeling suffocated and isolated from my comrades,' Sanyal had explained on his return to Sebdella Jote.

Sanyal's reasoning was that since due to his political obligations he could never perform his duties towards the family, he lacked the moral right to accept any favour from them.

Amidst the frequent shifting of bases, Sanyal's health conditions improved to a considerable extent. His speech became completely normal and he was now able to walk with more vigour than before. Yet his gestures were suggestive of some restlessness at work inside him!

On one hand because of age and ailments, Sanyal was feeling exhausted in dragging himself along and on the other, on returning to Sebdella Jote, he was once again pitched against the hassles of routine hurdles of living it on his own.

'I don't feel ok. I am exhausted. What is the purpose of living such an inactive and incapable life? It is better if I died,' he would often tell his aides Pradeep Debnath and Shanti Munda.

It was in 2002 that the CPI-ML central committee had entrusted Debnath—a party whole-timer—to assist Sanyal in political activities and also to take care of him. Since then, Debnath used to accompany Sanyal almost like a shadow. His house was located barely 50 m away from Sanyal's office-cum-residence; but keeping in mind the veteran's frail health, Debnath used to stay put with Sanyal at night.

Debnath's other functions included drafting party letters on behalf of Sanyal, call up people on his behalf and travel with him wherever he went. In short, Debanth was the 'personal assistant' of Kanu Sanyal—if one wants to put it that way.

This time, Debnath's wife Joya took the responsibility of cooking Sanyal his meals. Joya is the daughter of Shanti Munda and a tea worker by profession. Before going to work in the morning, she would

prepare the meal and Debnath would serve it to Sanyal at lunch. On her return home from work, Joya served the dinner.

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In January 2010, accompanied by Pradeeep Debath, Sanyal went to Kolkata to attend the CPI-ML's annual central conference. The conference was held between 17 and 20 January; there Sanyal was once again unanimously elected the general secretary of the party.

Considering Sanyal's ailing health and the need for proper care and treatment, the CPI-ML central committee decided to send him ₹4,500 a month. They decided that the money would be sent through bank transfers at the end of every month; Debanth was asked to pay for necessary expenses using that sum. Sanyal was initially hesitant to accept the offer but relented at the collective request of the party leaderships.

Sanyal and Debnath returned to Sebdella Jote from Kolkata on 21 January. As decided, ₹4,500 assistance for the month of January reached him on time. The arrangement continued in the month of February as well.

'That was a very apt step that the central committee took. Kanu *Da*'s usual monthly expense was only around ₹2,000; hence, there was a scope that we could utilise the excess amount to provide him better amenities and treatment,' Debnath pointed out.

However, that was not to happen! Financial assistance was not what Sanyal was craving for; he was longing for care and companionship. He wanted to stay surrounded by comrades and the near ones at his Sebdella Jote office. But as usually happens, people used to visit him at their convenience and not necessarily when Sanyal would expect them to. This would add to his depression.

Owing to old age, his mood also began to fluctuate every now and then. To be precise, a sense of restlessness was haunting him wherever he went.

On 14 March 2010, Sanyal's aide Pradeep Debnath went to his native place Shamuktala in the Dooras. Since there was none else to look after Sanyal, Debnath dropped him at the house of Dulal Karanjai at Bagdogra. Karanjai was an old friend of Sanyal.

The place was thought appropriate for Sanyal's temporary stay as his diehard sympathiser Uma Lahiri's house is located nearby. Uma happens

to be the daughter of Sanyal's old comrade Naresh Sarkar. Sanyal stayed at Bagdogra till 17 March when Debnath brought him back to Sebdella Jote on his return.

'Two to three days after returning to Sebdella Jote as we were about to go to bed, Kanu *Da* said that it would have been better if he did not return from Bagdogra. He also expressed his desire to permanently relocate to Bagdogra,' Debnath recalled.

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The morning of 23 March 2010 was not any different for Sanyal or probably it was! He woke up at the usual 5.30 a.m. and freshened up. Accompanied by aide Pradeep Debnath, he then embarked on the routine morning-walk from Sebdella Jote to Hatighisha Bazar.

'On returning from the stroll, Kanu *Da* and I had our breakfast on the party office veranda. It was during breakfast that he once again expressed the desire to permanently shift to Dulal Karanjai's house at Bagdogra. When Kanu *Da* sought my opinion, I responded by saying that it was up to him to do what he thought best.'

'After this, around 8.30 a.m., he first called up Dulal Karanjai and then made a call to Uma Lahiri at Bagdogra. Incidentally, Dulal *Babu* was not at home at that moment; his younger brother took the call. When Kanu *Da* conveyed him the plan to move into their residence, he promised to pass on the message to Dulal *Babu*. After this, Kanu *Da* called up Uma Lahiri,' Debnath recalled.

'*Kaku* (Sanyal) rang me up on my cell phone around 8.55 a.m. and wanted to know if I were coming to Sebdella Jote that day. Replying in negative, I promised to visit him after two days; perhaps this caused him some disheartenment. During the conversation, *Kaku* conveyed me his decision to move into Dulal *Mama*'s place at the earliest possible,' Lahiri corroborated.

But Sanyal's relocation to Bagdogra never happened. The revolutionary flame of the legendary Communist aberrantly snuffed out on the afternoon of 23 March 2010.

Around 12.30 p.m. on that Tuesday noon, Kanu Sanyal's lifeless body was found hanging in his one-room party-office-cum-residence. It was his old comrade Shanti Munda who first encountered the horrific scene.

'There was nothing unusual, nor was there any prior indication of what had happened. Kanu *Da* bathed around 11.30 a.m., Jangal Santhal's son Upen, who lives adjacent to the party office, helped him by washing his clothes. Around 12 noon or so, Joya served him lunch at the party office veranda and Kanu *Da* finished his meal complete. Post-lunch, he entered the office-room for the usual afternoon nap.'

'It was probably around 12.30 p.m., while passing by the party-office, I spotted Kanu *Da*'s dry *lungi* lying out in the sun. This aroused a slight curiosity in my mind as Kanu *Da* used to lug back his dry clothes before going for the nap. Hence, I peeped into the office-room through the front right window to find out if Kanu *Da* was asleep or not.'

'But to my horror, I discovered him hanging from the ceiling. After staying flabbergasted for a few moments, I cried out for help. Pradeep was a few hundred metres away near the water-treatment plant in our neighbourhood; he and others ran into the scene only to reaffirm what I had seen. Kanu *Da* was dead,' Munda said narrating the eventful day.

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As the shocking news spread, a number of media, police and common people rushed to the CPI-ML Sebdella Jote party office. Amidst an all-permeating wailing by *Adivasi* women, the Block Development Officer (BDO) of Naxalbari, Hemant Sewa, performed an inquest of the body.

Sanyal was found hanging with a nylon rope from the wooden-shaft of the ceiling; his feet were partially in contact with the floor. Sanyal was hanging with his back turned towards the lone door of the room; a plastic chair and a wooden stool stood in front of the body.

Done with the inquest, the police sent the dead body to the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri for post-mortem. Although no foul play was discovered during post-mortem, there was widespread disbelief about Sanyal having been committed suicide.

The next day afternoon, that is, on 24 March, the Naxal legend's lifeless body was brought to his Sebdella Jote party-office. A large number of people representing various organisations or in their individual capacity paid homage to Kanu Sanyal. But the most heartening tribute was accorded by the merchants of Naxalbari—the small market place that Sanyal and his comrades made famous worldwide.

As soon as Sanyal's cortege rolled into the Naxalbari market area, the merchants and commoners alike stood up in spontaneity. Through their silence, they paid the last salute to the founder of the Naxalbari Movement.

From Naxalbari, the cortege drove into Siliguri and was kept at the Khudirampally locality in the town; hundreds paid their homage there. Finally around 6 p.m., Sanyal was cremated at the Kiranchandra Memorial Municipal Crematorium in Siliguri, bringing the ash to the ashes.

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Till date, the CPI-ML central committee refuses to accept that Kanu Sanyal had committed suicide. At the same time, they, however, do not clearly point finger at any other cause responsible for the legend's aberrant death.

'On behalf of the CPI-ML central committee, I would like to put it on record that we do not accept that Kanu *Da* has committed suicide. Our conviction stems from the fact that Kanu *Da* participated in the central committee meeting as recently as in the month of January. He had also given his nod to remain present in our state committee meeting, which was scheduled to be held at Sebdella Jote in April. Our CC is conducting an internal probe into the death of comrade Kanu Sanyal,' the CPI-ML central executive member and the West Bengal state secretary, Subrata Basu had told the Press on 24 March, a day after the legend's aberrant death.

Sanyal's closest aide and immediate caretaker, Pradeep Denath, however, did not go with the CPI-ML central committee's observation.

'It is sad but is an undeniable truth that Kanu *Da* had indeed committed suicide. Due to an ailing health, he was suffering from depression. He was inflicted with loneliness as well. There were several occasions during the course of casual conversations when Kanu *Da* used to talk of committing suicide inviting instant reprimand from me. But on the fateful day, he gave no hint before taking the extreme step,' Debnath said.

Sanyal's old comrade and neighbour, Shanti Munda, also spoke in the same vein. Moreover, there was no apparent motive for which Kanu Sanyal could have been made a victim of some foul play.

Whatever might have been the cause of Kanu Sanyal's death—suicide or otherwise—it hardly robs him the glory of an extraordinary life that he lived. He was a legend who not only preached a Communist struggle but also lived it throughout his life.

It would be no exaggeration to say that after Mahatma Gandhi, Kanu Sanyal was one of the very few Indians whose life was a message in itself.

Albeit it is a different issue that while Gandhi preached non-violence all his life, Sanyal advocated an armed Communist struggle to establish a just society.

Kanu Sanyal was a rebel who strived hard to establish the Communist ethos in India. He might not have succeeded in the endeavour in his lifetime, but he never gave up. He died as a rebel—a rebel who did not return home.

Photographs

Kanu Sanyal (standing second from left in last row) in an old family photograph at Siliguri. *Courtesy:* Prabir Sanyal.

Kanu Sanyal (extreme right) speaking at the West Bengal state plenum of the OCCR at Naxalbari in 1983. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Naxalite leaders M.H. Krishnappa, K.P.R. Gopalan and Kanu Sanyal (seated third from left in second row) with others during a party event in Kerala in 1980s. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

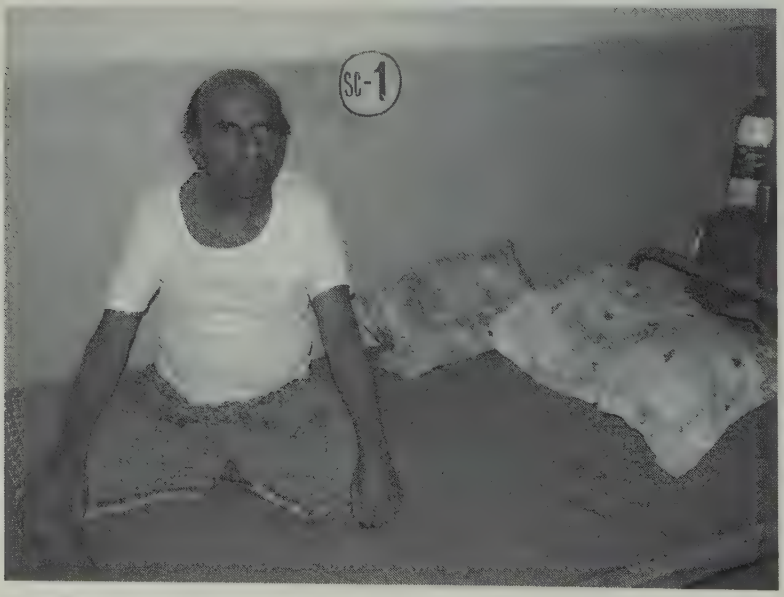
Kanu Sanyal addressing an election rally at Naxalbari in late 1980. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Kanu Sanyal (second from left) with Naxalite comrades Anil Mukherjee (extreme left), Asit Sinha (third) and CPI leader Gurudas Dasgupta during a trade union conference in Siliguri in 2001. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Kanu Sanyal paying homage on the Naxal martyrs' column at Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh in 1998. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Kanu Sanyal (second from left) during a party conference at Vijaynagaram in Andhra Pradesh in 2000. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Kanu Sanyal speaking at an election rally at Vijaynagaram in Andhra Pradesh in 2000. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.



Kanu Sanyal at the North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri on 8 July 2008 after suffering a cerebral attack. *Courtesy:* Author.

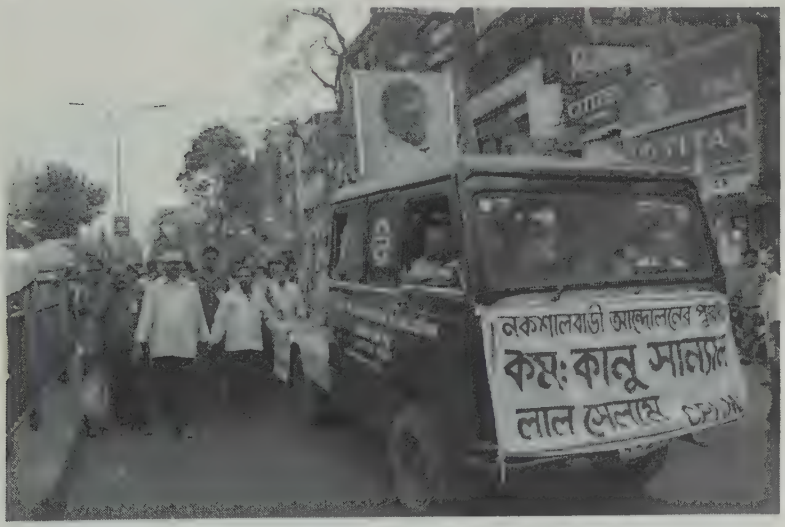
Kanu Sanyal at his Hatighisha, Naxalbari, hutment in November 2008. *Courtesy:* Author.

Kanu Sanyal on the veranda of his Hatighisha hutment in November 2008. *Courtesy:* Author.

The interior of the hutment at Hatighisha, Naxalbari, where Kanu Sanyal lived and breathed his last. *Courtesy:* Author.

An external view of the hutment at Hatighisha, Naxalbari, where Kanu Sanyal lived and breathed his last. *Courtesy:* Author.

People paying their last tribute to Kanu Sanyal's mortal remains at Khudiram Pally ground in Siliguri on 24 March 2010. *Courtesy:* Prem Arora.

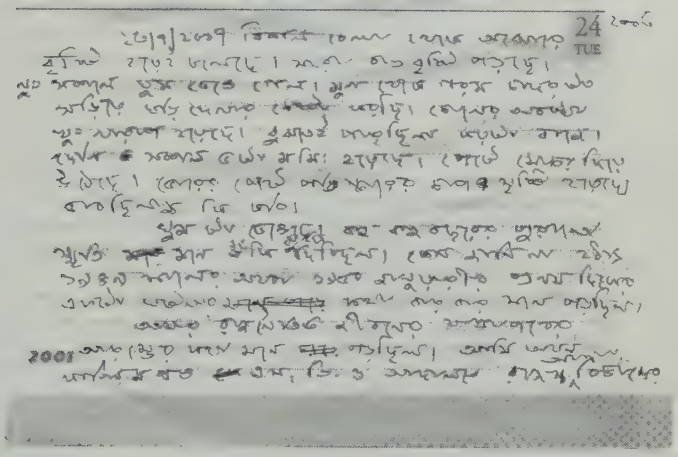


Kanu Sanyal's cortege traversing through Hill Cart Road in Siliguri on 24 March 2010. *Courtesy:* Prem Arora.

The Martyrs Tomb (extreme right) at Prasadu Jote, Naxalbari, in memory of the first 11 Naxalite martyrs killed by police on 25 May 1967. Busts of Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-tung and Naxal ideologue Charu Mazumdar stand nearby. *Courtesy:* Author.

Martyr tomb of Naxalite Babulal Biswakarmakar at Birsigh Jote village near Naxalbari. *Courtesy:* Author.

Historic Documents and News Clippings



23 July 2007, it's been raining cats and dogs since (yesterday) afternoon. It rained all night. I have woken up very early at dawn. Removing the blanket-cover off my face, I looked up at the wall-clock for time but my vision these days has got so impaired that I am hardly able to figure out anything properly. It is 5 o'clock. I need to respond to nature's call but it is raining very heavily, making me ponder as to what to do.

I have woken up with the glimpses of some old memories overcrowding my mind. I do not know why I am suddenly reminded of the happenings way back in 1949 or in early January 1950: the initial days of my long and arduous political journey are coming alive in my mind. I was then posted at the SDO office in Kalimpong as a revenue collection clerk.

A mid-2007 unsuccessful attempt by Kanu Sanyal to scribble in Bengali the events of his life and the Naxalite Movement. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Malayala Manorama
The Leading Malayalam Daily

ESTD—1888

MANORAMA BUILDINGS
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KOTTAYAM 686 001. KERALA
GRAMS : 'MANORAMA'
PHONE : 3615 (6 LINES)
TELEX : 0868-201 MNR-IN.

P&A/13/84/921
12/4/1984

Mr.Kanu Sanyal
Sebdella Village
Hati Gheesa P.O.
Darjeeling
West Bengal

Dear Mr.Sanyal,

We are enclosing a copy of our 'The Week' issue dated April 15-21, in which we have carried the apology. All conditions laid out by you have been fulfilled as you can see.

One of the accused will be present in the court on 27th of April, the date on which the case stands posted.

As confirmed by you earlier, we hope that the compromise petition will be filed by both parties before the court of the S.D.J.M., Siliguri on 27th.

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,

RAJAN MATHEW
(Personnel & Admn.Dvn.Manager)

Calicut Unit : Wynad Road, P. B. No. 187, Calicut 673 011 • Phone: 73305 (4 lines)
Cochin Unit : Panampilly Nagar, P. B. No. 2314, Cochin 682 016 • Phone: 36285 (5 lines)
Branch Offices : Bombay, Bangalore, Calcutta, Hyderabad, Madras, New Delhi and Trivandrum

A 1984 apology letter by *Malayala Manorama* for publishing an untrue article about Kanu Sanyal. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.

Kanu Sanyal

APOLOGY

I wrote an article in the magazine "THE WEEK", dated June 12-18, 1983, containing some serious allegations against Mr Kanu Sanyal, the eminent Naxalite leader, on the basis of incorrect information, which I have come to know afterwards is totally false and baseless. I am repentant for my said act and I sincerely express my regret for the same. I also beg to make an unconditional apology to Sri Kanu Sanyal and I believe I shall be excused by Sri Sanyal this time.

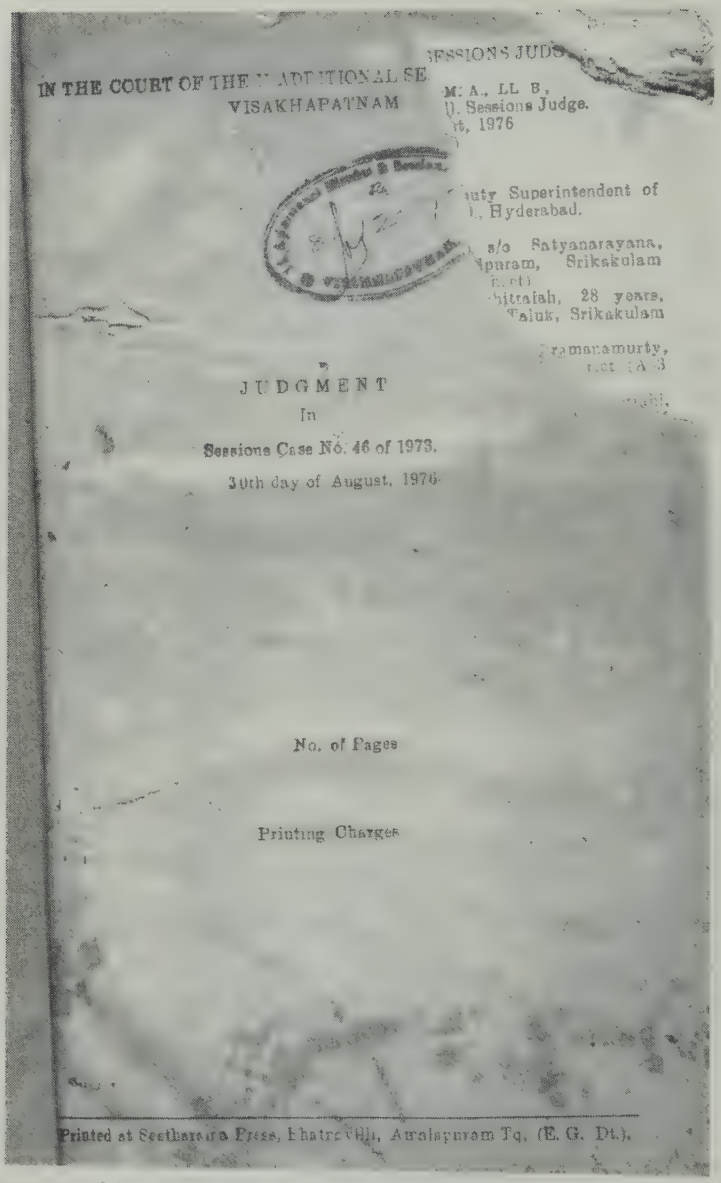
Anil Saari,
New Delhi.

THE issue of "THE WEEK" dated June 12-18, 1983, contained a report captioned 'Kanu Sanyal—Rich Naxalite' We had published that report by our correspondent in good faith, but it now appears that the allegations in it were false and baseless. We sincerely regret its publication and apologise for the offence unwittingly caused to Mr Kanu Sanyal. We do not question Mr Sanyal's personal integrity or his dedication to his political beliefs.

The correspondent concerned has offered his resignation, which has been accepted in the circumstances.

Editor

The apology in *The Week*, issue dated 15–21 April 1984, for publishing a defamatory and incorrect article in an earlier issue of the magazine. *Courtesy:* CPI-ML Darjeeling district committee.



ESSIONS JUDG
IN THE COURT OF THE ADDITIONAL SE
VISAKHAPATNAM
M. A., LL B.,
). Sessions Judge.
t, 1976

uty Superintendent of
, Hyderabad.

a/o Satyanarayana,
puram, Srikakulam
ittaiah, 28 years,
Taluk, Srikakulam

ramanamurty,
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JUDGMENT

In

Sessions Case No. 46 of 1973.

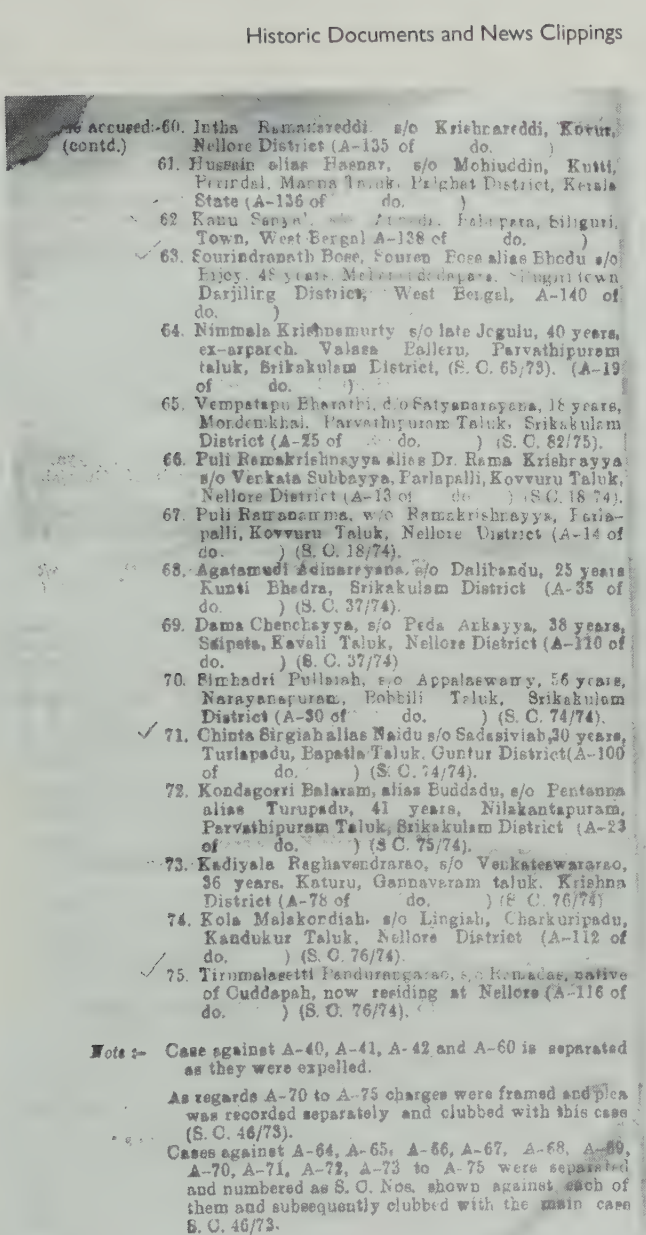
30th day of August, 1976

No. of Pages

Printing Charges

Printed at Seetharama Press, Bhatrachalam, Amalapuram Tq. (E. G. Dt.).

Cover-page of the Visakhapatnam court judgement in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case in which Kanu Sanyal was sentenced to life imprisonment. *Courtesy:* Prabir Sanyal.



...e accused:-(contd.)

60. Intha Ramasareddi s/o Krishnareddi, Kovur, Nellore District (A-135 of do.)
61. Hussain alias Hasnar, s/o Mohiuddin, Kutti, Perundal, Manna Taluk, Palghat District, Kerala State (A-136 of do.)
62. Kanu Sanyal, [illegible], Bakupara, Siliguri, Town, West Bengal A-138 of do.)
63. Sourindranath Bose, Souren Bose alias Bhodu s/o [illegible], Engineer, 48 years, Mehta Bhadepara, Siliguri town Darjiling District, West Bengal, A-140 of do.)
64. Nimmala Krishnamurty s/o late Jogulu, 40 years, ex-arparch. Valasa Balleru, Parvathipuram taluk, Srikakulam District, (S. C. 65/73). (A-19 of do.)
65. Vempatapu Bharathi, d/o Satyanarayana, 18 years, Mondemkhal, Parvathipuram Taluk, Srikakulam District (A-25 of do.) (S. C. 82/75).
66. Puli Ramakrishnayya alias Dr. Rama Krishnayya s/o Venkata Subbayya, Parlapalli, Kovvuru Taluk, Nellore District (A-13 of do.) (S.C. 18/74).
67. Puli Ramanamma, w/o Ramakrishnayya, Parlapalli, Kovvuru Taluk, Nellore District (A-14 of do.) (S. C. 18/74).
68. Agatamudi Adinarryana, s/o Dalibandu, 25 years Kunti Bhedra, Srikakulam District (A-35 of do.) (S. C. 37/74).
69. Dama Chenchayya, s/o Peda Arkayya, 38 years, Sitipeta, Kavali Taluk, Nellore District (A-110 of do.) (S. C. 37/74)
70. Simhadri Pullaiah, s/o Appalaswamy, 56 years, Narayanapuram, Bobbili Taluk, Srikakulam District (A-30 of do.) (S. C. 74/74).
71. Chinta Sirgiah alias Naidu s/o Sadasiviah, 30 years, Turlapadu, Bapatla Taluk, Guntur District (A-100 of do.) (S. C. 74/74).
72. Kondagorri Balaram, alias Buddadu, s/o Pentanna alias Turupadu, 41 years, Nilakantapuram, Parvathipuram Taluk, Srikakulam District (A-23 of do.) (S C. 75/74).
73. Kadiyala Raghavendrarao, s/o Venkateswararao, 36 years. Katuru, Gannavaram taluk. Krishna District (A-78 of do.) (S. C. 76/74)
74. Kola Malakondiah, s/o Lingiah, Charkuripadu, Kandukur Taluk, Nellore District (A-112 of do.) (S. C. 76/74).
75. Tirumalasetti Pandurangarao, s/o Ramadas, native of Cuddapah, now residing at Nellore (A-116 of do.) (S. C. 76/74).

Note :- Case against A-40, A-41, A-42 and A-60 is separated as they were expelled.

As regards A-70 to A-75 charges were framed and plea was recorded separately and clubbed with this case (S. C. 46/73).

Cases against A-64, A-65, A-66, A-67, A-68, A-69, A-70, A-71, A-72, A-73 to A-75 were separated and numbered as S. C. Nos. shown against each of them and subsequently clubbed with the main case S. C. 46/73.

Kanu Sanyal and Souren Bose's names at S. Nos. 62 and 63 in the list of convicts in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case. *Courtesy:* Prabir Sanyal.

33604

University of Calcutta

MATRICULATION EXAMINATION

I certify that Krishnatarun Sanyal

of Jessore Pashparani High Madrasa E. B. aged

16 years 7 months on the 1st of March, 1947, duly passed

the Matriculation Examination held in the month of June,

1947, and was placed in the Second Division.

SENATE HOUSE:

The 18th September, 1947.

Controller of Examinations

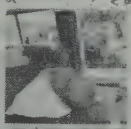
Kanu Sanyal's matriculation certificate issued by the Calcutta University in 1947. *Courtesy:* Prabir Sanyal.

উত্তরবঙ্গ সংবাদ

বিপ্লবী নেতা কানু সান্যাল আত্মঘাতী

দৈনিক স্টেটসম্যান

আত্মঘাতী কানু সান্যাল, মৃত্যু ঘিরে রহস্য

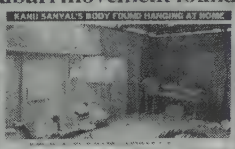


The Statesman

Kanu Sanyal kills self

The Telegraph

Naxalbari movement founder kills self



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times

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24, 2010

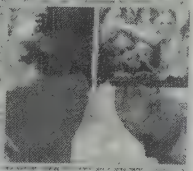
1928 - 2010

Kanu Sanyal kills self

আনন্দবাজার পত্রিকা

অবসাদই কারণ, মনে করছে পুলিশ

নিজের মাটির ঘরেই আত্মঘাতী কানু সান্যাল



Newspaper reports published on 24 March 2010 on the aberrant death of Kanu Sanyal a day before. *Courtesy:* Author.

Glossary

Adihars: Sharecropper or tenant farmers.

Adivasi: Aboriginal or tribal.

Anna: A currency unit formerly used in India that equalled to 1/16 rupee. The term belonged to the Muslim monetary system.

Anushilan samiti: An armed anti-British secret revolutionary organisation in early 20th-century Bengal that used to operate under the guise of sub-urban fitness club. The organisation was committed to armed revolution for the independence of India; its activities included robbery, making of bombs, arms training and assassination of British officials and their Indian stooges.

Basanta panchami: A Hindu religious festival held on the fifth day of Magha (in early February) marking the start of spring. On this day, Hindus worship Devi Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, music, art and culture.

Bhat: Steamed rice, a staple food in several parts of India, including Bengal.

Bidi: A thin, Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flake and wrapped in tendu leaf tied with a string at one end.

Borda: Elder brother.

Bouma: Wife of son or younger brother.

Chittagong armoury raid: A raid by Indian armed revolutionaries on 18 April 1930 on the armoury of police and auxiliary forces at the Chittagong armoury in Bengal province of British India.

Chowkidar: A watchman or gatekeeper.

CrPc: Abbreviation for the Code of Criminal Procedure, the main legislation enacted in 1973 on procedure for administration of substantive criminal law in India.

Da: Shortened form of Bengali word 'Dada', which means elder brother. In social conversation, 'Da' is suffixed to the name of an elder person as a mark of respect.

Daju: Elder borther in Nepali.

Dharmasala: Charitable low-cost community accommodations run by religious groups or linguistic communities.

Dusa: Blanket in colloquial language of northern Bengal tea workers.

Gram panchayat: The lower-most tier of a three-tier local self-government institution in rural India.

Haat: An open weekly market in rural or sub-urban West Bengal.

Kaku: Uncle.

Lalgarh: A village in West Midnapore district of West Bengal where local *Adivasis* launched a massive armed agitation against police atrocities and underdevelopment in 2008.

Lungi: A traditional garment sewn into tube shape like a skirt and worn around the waist, particularly, by man in the Indian subcontinent.

Maa: Mother.

Mama: Maternal uncle.

Nandigram: A rural area with two community development blocks in West Midnapore district of West Bengal. In 2007, West Bengal government decided to allow a private chemical hub to come up at Nandigram under the special economic zone policy. This led to resistance by the villagers resulting in clashes with the police that left 14 villagers dead.

Panjabi: A traditional upper garment for male and female in the Indian subcontinent.

Panta bhat: Leftover rice soaked in water to prevent spoiling and generally served the day after with salt, onion and chilli.

Payesh: A dessert prepared by boiling rice in milk along with sugar.

Podu cultivation: A form of shifting cultivation popular among *Adivasis*.

Quit India Movement: A 1942 civil disobedience movement in India launched in August 1942 in response to Mahatma Gandhi's call for *Satyagraha*. The All-India Congress Committee proclaimed a mass protest demanding what Gandhi had called 'an orderly British withdrawal' from India.

Santali: A language spoken by the *Adivasi* Munda community.

Sharecropper: Landless farmers who cultivate on someone else's land on a harvest-sharing basis.

Singur: A town in Hooghly district of West Bengal that came to the limelight in 2006 following mass protests by farmers against forcible acquisition of land by the state government for a private small car factory.

Tebhaga Movement: A 1946 campaign in pre-Independent Bengal by the Krishak Sabha—the peasants' wing of the Communist Party of India. At that time, sharecropping peasants had to give half of their harvest to the owners of the land; the demand of *Tebhaga* (sharing by thirds) movement was to reduce the landlords' share to one-third.

Vande Mataram: Literally meaning *I bow to thee, Mother*—is a poem from *Anandamath*, an 1882 Bengali novel by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. It is a hymn to the Mother Land first sung in a political context by Rabindranath Tagore at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress and subsequently played a vital role in the Indian Independence Movement.

Zamindar: A landowner who by hereditary used to own enormous tracts of land and lease out the same to tenant farmers.

The Life and Times of Kanu Sanyal: A Chronology

1. In the monsoon of 1929, Kanu Sanyal is born at Bhalu Busty in Kurseong, West Bengal.
2. In 1942, the Communist Party of India establishes its organisation in Darjeeling hills.
3. On 9 August 1942, Kanu Sanyal participates in a Quit India protest march in Kurseong.
4. In 1946, Kanu Sanyal fails in the first attempt in matriculation exam.
5. In 1947, Kanu Sanyal passes matriculation in the second division from Pushparani Roy Memorial HE School, Kurseong.
6. In February 1947, Kanu Sanyal's father Annada Govinda retires from government job and relocates the family from Kurseong to Kathalbagan in Siliguri.
7. In 1947, Kanu Sanyal is enrolled in the first year of Intermediate of Science (ISc) at Ananda Chandra College, Jalpaiguri.
8. In 1947, Kanu Sanyal visits Calcutta for the first time with Congress leader Chitta Ranjan Das Sharma to see Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's house.
9. On 30 December 1947, Kanu Sanyal visits Calcutta for the second time to attend a Congress rally at Monument Maidan. Breaks his left arm by stumbling in the crowd.
10. In 1948, Kanu Sanyal fails in the ISc exam and gives up studies.
11. On 25 March 1948, the provincial government in West Bengal bans the Communist Party.

12. In 1948, Kanu Sanyal along with five others forms *Jana Raksha Samity* to campaign against the ban on Communist Party.
13. In late 1948, Kanu Sanyal gets government job as a revenue collection clerk at Kalimpong subdivisional office.
14. On 18 December 1949, *Jana Raksha Samity* organises a protest march in Siliguri coinciding the visit by Chief Minister Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy.
15. In January 1950, Kanu Sanyal is transferred from Kalimpong to Siliguri SDO office.
16. In January 1950, Kanu Sanyal is arrested for participating in the 18 December 1949 protest march against Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy and sent to Siliguri Sub-Jail.
17. In April 1950, Kanu Sanyal becomes a member of the Communist Party of India.
18. In the summer of 1950, Kanu Sanyal is arrested for being involved with the Communist Party and sent to Jalpaiguri Central Jail. There, he gets introduced to his ideologue mentor Charu Mazumdar.
19. In December 1950, Kanu Sanyal is made member of the Darjeeling District Organising Committee of CPI.
20. In early 1951, West Bengal government lifts the ban from CPI.
21. In October 1951, Kanu Sanyal becomes a CPI whole-timer.
22. In January 1952, for the first time Kanu Sanyal camps at Naxalbari to campaign for the Assembly poll.
23. In 1952, CPI appoints Kanu Sanyal as secretary of Darjeeling district Krishak Sabha and asks him to build up a peasant movement.
24. In 1952, Charu Mazumdar relocates from Jalpaiguri to Siliguri.
25. In late 1952, Kanu Sanyal permanently moves into Naxalbari.
26. In 1953, Kanu Sanyal attends the West Bengal State Conference of the Krishak Sabha at Malda.
27. In February 1954, Kanu Sanyal is arrested in connecting with a skirmish with landlords at Birsingh Jote village and sent to judicial custody at Siliguri Sub-Jail.
28. In 1955, the Congress-led West Bengal government enacts the West Bengal Land Reforms Act; Darjeeling district Krishak Sabha calls it a sham.

29. On 22 June 1955, the first-ever general strike is convened in the tea estates of north Bengal demanding bonus and opposing the owners' move to give wage only for 4-days-a-week.
30. On 25 June 1955, six workers are killed in a police firing on the striking tea workers at Margaret's Hope tea estate near Sonada in Darjeeling hills.
31. In 1958, the Provincial *Kisan* Committee (PKC) gives call for repealing all illegal land transfers made by the landlords in West Bengal between 5 March 1953 and 5 May 1955 but the Darjeeling district Krishak Sabha opposes fixing any cut-off period.
32. In the beginning of December 1958, following a call by the Darjeeling district Krishak Sabha, sharecroppers in Terai start reaping the paddy harvest to own warehouses without giving the landlords a share.
33. In late 1959, in connection with pending cases, Kanu Sanyal surrenders before police at the instruction of party higher-ups and is sent to jail for 4 months.
34. In 1960, Kanu Sanyal is sentenced to 13-month jail in connection with the Krishak Sabha agitation in Terai and is sent to the Beherampore Central Jail.
35. On 4 December 1962, Kanu Sanyal is arrested under the Defence of India Rules as part of Government of India's crackdown on pro-China Communist leaders.
36. On 26 January 1963, Kanu Sanyal is freed from the Dum Dum Central Jail.
37. In 1964, CPI-M is formed by a split in the CPI.
38. In October 1964, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose oppose the absence of Mao Tse-tung's photograph in CPI-M's first ever state conference in Calcutta.
39. On 4 December 1964, Kanu Sanyal is arrested on charges of harbouring links with Naga and Manipuri insurgents of northeast India.
40. In June 1966, Kanu Sanyal is released from Dum Dum Jail.
41. Between 1965 and 1966, Charu Mazumdar pens the Historic Eight Documents.
42. In 1966, a radical faction led by Charu Mazumdar starts operating within the CPI-M Darjeeling district committee.

43. In 1966, Charu Mazumdar is expelled from CPI-M for giving call to armed insurrection.
44. In late 1966, Kanu Sanyal is arrested in connection with the food movement and is sent to Dum Dum Jail.
45. In February 1967, Kanu Sanyal is released on bail.
46. In 1967, Left parties defeat the Congress in Assembly poll and form the first United Front government.
47. On 18 March 1967, Krishak Sabha gives call for an all-out arms offensive against landlords in Terai.
48. In April 1967, a landlord is lynched by Krishak Sabha activists for opening fire on a farmer.
49. On 24 May 1967, Krishak Sabha activists kill police inspector Sonam Wangdi who had gone to Borojhoru Jote village to arrest Kanu Sanyal. This marks the formal outbreak of Naxalbari Movement.
50. On 25 May 1967, police kill 11 Krishak Sabha agitators at Prasadu Jote village near Naxalbari.
51. In mid-1967, at the direction of Charu Mazumdar, Krishna Bhakta Sharma of Kalimpong goes to China to seek support for the Naxalbari Movement.
52. On 5 July 1967, the *People's Daily of China* publishes an editorial calling the Naxalbari Movement 'The Spring Thunder over India'.
53. In 1967, CPI-M central committee dissolves the Darjeeling district committee.
54. In September 1967, Kanu Sanyal and three other Naxalbari rebels embark on a visit to China via East Pakistan but return unsuccessful.
55. In late-September 1967, Kanu Sanyal and three other Naxalbari rebels embark on a fresh attempt to visit China; this time via Kathmandu in Nepal.
56. On 30 September 1967, Kanu Sanyal and three other Naxalbari rebels reach Peking.
57. On 2 October 1967, Kanu Sanyal and his group briefly meet Mao Tse-tung.
58. From 4 October 1967, Kanu Sanyal and his group undergo a near 3-month ideological and military training in Peking on Mao Tse-tung tactics.

59. In November 1967, the All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) takes shape within the CPI-M.
60. In December 1967, days before their return from China, Kanu Sanyal and his group hold a 45-minute discussion with Mao Tse-tung seeking advice for the Naxalbari Movement.
61. On 26 December 1967, Kanu Sanyal and his group return to Naxalbari from China.
62. In December 1967, at the behest of Charu Mazumdar, Sourin Bose embarks on a tour of China to seek support.
63. On 20 February 1968, President's Rule is imposed on West Bengal to supress the spread of Naxalbari Movement.
64. In April 1968, the All India Coordination Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) assumes an identity independent of the CPI-M.
65. On 7 September 1968, Kanu Sanyal's close comrade Babulal Biswakarma is killed in police encounter.
66. On 30 October 1968, Kanu Sanyal is arrested by police from Birsingh Jote village and sent to Darjeeling Jail.
67. On 25 February 1969, President's Rule is lifted from West Bengal and mid-term Assembly poll is held in which CPI-M led United Front comes to power.
68. On 9 April 1969, Kanu Sanyal is released from Darjeeling Jail as the United Front government withdraws all litigations pending against him.
69. In mid-April 1969, Kanu Sanyal goes to Calcutta and participates in the AICCCR conference from 19 April.
70. On 27 April 1969, AICCCR decides to float a new party christened as the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist).
71. On 1 May 1969, with Charu Mazumdar seated beside him, Kanu Sanyal announces the launch of CPI-ML at a public rally in Monument Maidan, Calcutta.
72. In July 1969, toeing Charu Mazumdar's 'individual annihilation line', Naxalites in Calcutta murder Forward Bloc leader Hemanta Bose in broad daylight.
73. In late-July 1969, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose go to Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh to guide and assist the Naxal revolutionaries there.

74. In end-August 1969, Kanu Sanyal returns to Naxalbari from Srikakulam.
75. On 19 March 1970, President's Rule is imposed on West Bengal for failing to curb the Naxal rebels.
76. In April 1970, a conference of the CPI-ML central organising committee is held in Calcutta.
77. From 15 to 16 May 1970, the first CPI-ML party Congress is held at Garden Reach in Calcutta.
78. In mid-1970, Kanu Sanyal's mother dies in Siliguri but he fails to attend her last rites.
79. On 19 August 1970, Kanu Sanyal is arrested by police along with 12 aides and sent to Darjeeling Jail.
80. On 25 August 1970, Charu Mazumdar sends Sourin Bose to Peking to renew ties with China.
81. In October 1970, Naxal rebels loot five rifles from a state home-guard camp in West Dinajpur.
82. On 28 November 1970, Sourin Bose returns from China with loads of criticisms from the Communist Party of China.
83. In December 1970, an ill Charu Mazumdar goes to Puri, Orissa, for recuperation.
84. On 6 March 1971, Sourin Bose is arrested by police and sent to Visakhapatnam Jail in Andhra Pradesh.
85. In May 1971, Kanu Sanyal is relocated from Darjeeling Jail to Visakhapatnam Jail for trial in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case.
86. On 2 April 1971, President's Rule is lifted from West Bengal.
87. On 28 June 1971, President's Rule is again imposed on West Bengal.
88. On 4 August 1971, Saroj Dutta is killed in a controversial police encounter in Calcutta.
89. In November 1971, Satnarayan Singh convenes a meeting of the CPI-ML central committee in Bihar and expels Charu Mazumdar from the party.
90. In February 1972, Assembly poll is held in West Bengal and the Congress returns to power.
91. On 16 July 1972, Calcutta Police arrest Charu Mazumdar from a city hideout.
92. On 28 July 1972, Charu Mazumdar dies in Lalbazar police lockup.

93. By 1973, nearly 32,000 Naxal activists and supporters are arrested across India.
94. On 15 August 1974, some 300-odd academics and prominent personalities from across the globe write to Government of India protesting the torture on Naxal prisoners.
95. On 26 June 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declares a National Emergency in India.
96. On 30 August 1976, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose are sentenced to life imprisonment in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case.
97. In November 1976, Kanu Sanyal, Sourin Bose and others are relocated from Visakhapatnam Jail to the Alipore Central Jail in Calcutta.
98. In March 1977, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi calls for a general election in India.
99. In March 1977, CPI-ML faction led by Satnarayan Singh of Bihar calls for poll boycott. Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose issue a joint statement denouncing the boycott call.
100. On 23 March 1977, the election results show a Congress rout and Janata Party comes to power. Home Minister Choudhury Charan Singh initiates a reconciliation process with the Naxalites.
101. In June 1977, Assembly election is held in West Bengal; CPI-M led Left Front comes to power with an absolute majority. The new government start releasing political prisoners, including the Naxals.
102. In November 1977, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose are acquitted in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case by Hyderabad High Court but Andhra Pradesh government challenges this in the Supreme Court.
103. In April of 1979, the Supreme Court upholds Hyderabad High Court's order acquitting Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose in the Srikakulam Conspiracy Case.
104. In April 1979, the West Bengal government drops all charges against Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose in the Calcutta Conspiracy Case.
105. On 7 May 1979, Kanu Sanyal and Sourin Bose are released from Alipore Jail.

106. In November 1979, Kanu Sanyal takes over the reins of the Organising Committee for the Coordination of Communist Revolutionaries (OCCCR).
107. In February 1980, OCCCR is rechristened as the Organising Committee of the Communist Revolutionaries (OCCR).
108. In late 1980, Kanu Sanyal is operated upon for gall bladder at North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri.
109. In May 1981, OCCR holds first all-India conference in Naxalbari; Kanu Sanyal is elected the central general secretary.
110. In 12–18 June 1983 issue, *The Week* publishes a fictitious article claiming that Kanu Sanyal is married and has children and owns huge property. Sanyal files a defamation suit in Siliguri court.
111. In 15–21 April 1984 issue, *The Week* publishes an apology stating that the article about Kanu Sanyal was false and that the reporter has resigned taking responsibility for the blunder. Sanyal withdraws the defamation suit.
112. In May 1985, the Communist Organisation of India (Marxist-Leninist) is formed by the merger of six Naxalite groups; Kanu Sanyal is elected its general secretary.
113. By 1991, COI-ML splits into two camps—one led by Kanu Sanyal and the other led by M.H. Krishnappa of Karnataka.
114. On 6 February 1999, Kanu Sanyal is attacked by dacoits in a train when he was returning from Kolkata to Siliguri.
115. On 17 January 2003, the COI-ML and the Central Organising Committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)—Janashakti merge to assume the name of CPI-ML.
116. On 26 June 2008, Kanu Sanyal suffers a cerebral attack and is admitted to North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in Siliguri the next day.
117. On 23 March 2010, Kanu Sanyal is found hanging in his party office at Sebdella Jote, Naxalbari.

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It seldom happens that the story of an individual becomes so intertwined with the cause she or he stands for that it becomes impossible to separate the one from the other.

Kanu Sanyal's is one such rare story: to read it is to relive the history of the Naxalite Movement, which the Indian establishments call the country's biggest internal security threat.

This book narrates the making of Kanu Sanyal right from his childhood to the days of the Naxalbari uprising and beyond. It delves deep into Sanyal's evolution as a Communist rebel and throws light on the various stages of the Naxalite Movement with relevant background information.

What is significant about this book is that this is the only authorised biography of Kanu Sanyal in any language—he personally read and cleared all its chapters but the last one, which deals with his aberrant demise.

Bappaditya Paul is a senior reporter at *The Statesman* headquarters in Kolkata. He started with the newspaper in 2005 as a staff reporter in Siliguri. Paul has published a number of articles on issues ranging from Naxalism to Gorkhaland Movement, contemporary Indian politics to environmental degradation. This is his maiden book.

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